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The Woman Who Didn't

Victoria Crosse

THE WOMAN WHO DIDN'T

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THE WOMAN WHO DIDN'T

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THE WOMAN WHO DIDN'T

CHAPTER I

'BUT why not pay them? We may just as well now as when we reach the ship.'

The words came in a clear, cultivated woman's voice through the foggy duskiness of an Egyptian night, from the farther end of the boat, which swayed slightly from side to side on the smoothly heaving water.

It was an Aden boat loaded with passengers impatient to return to their ship. At least presumably they were impatient, but it was simply their refusal to pay the clamouring African boatmen their legitimate fee that kept us all waiting there, rocking in the unsteady wooden shell, with the semicircle of lights on

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the shore rising and falling before us through the hot sulphurous mist. The boatmen descriptively but firmly refused to loose the boat from the stage till each passenger had paid the due eightpence for his fare. The passengers clamoured and yelled, and swore that damned swine as they were, they should be paid when they reached the ship, and not before.

This sort of thing had been going on for half an hour while I sat smoking in the stern, watching the Scorpion in the jewelled sky above sinking slowly to the pointed rocks, and listening idly to the storm of oaths that was showered on the impassive blacks for daring to ask for their pay. I had already given my fare when I first stepped into the boat, so that the controversy did not concern me beyond my feeling bound to interfere when the man sitting next me, the British missionary, sprang to his feet with an oath that cannot be written, and raised his walking-stick to strike one of

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the boatmen in the face. I had just caught the heavy stick and forced him down again on to our cross bench when those clear tones came down to me.

They produced a distinct sensation of pleasure, and I threw a keen, scrutinising glance up the boat. In the thick yellow air, rendered all the more dazzling to the eyes by the broken, flaring light of the boatmen's torches, I saw sitting erect in the bows a long figure and the pale outlines of a face. The form was muffled in a dark voluminous cloak, and a hood was drawn over the head.

‘I should pay now ; if you mean to at all.’

The voice was certainly a fascinating one, and the last phrase had a supercilious scepticism in it that amused me.

I knew, as well as the boatmen did, the British passengers' honourable fashion of getting conveyed to their ship under promise to pay, and then huddling away upon it, leaving

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the boatmen to demand their money of the empty air, and evidently the possessor of the voice was familiar with that fashion too.

A burst of resentful ejaculation followed the suggestion.

‘What! pay them?’

‘And now, after their insolence?’

‘Give in to these damned scoundrels!’

‘Well,’ the cold voice broke in again, ‘I am going to pay mine, and I strongly advise you to, or we may lose our ship. What can it matter to you whether you pay now or afterwards?’

Again that delightful satire in the cutting tone.

There was a general murmur and muttering amongst the passengers, but the truth of the remark on losing the ship went home, and the murmur was followed by a simultaneous getting up of several forms, as everybody began fumbling sulkily for the necessary pence, grumbling and swearing as they did so.

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'Have you any change?'—'Oh, thanks,'—'Pay you on board,'—'Filthy pigs,'—and other broken remarks—were exchanged during another ten minutes, until finally the money was collected and each passenger had put his fare into the black extended hand above us.

'Now, have you all the fares?' asked the voice gently.

'Yes, madam; thanks to you, madam; thank you, madam,' answered the glib tones of the native.

'Then push off.'

The master-boatman gave the command and the natives on the stage pushed with a will. Our boat shot out rocking on the smooth bay.

'Good-night, madam,' called the boatman respectfully to the figure in the bows.

'Good-night,' it answered, and I was struck now by the note of sweetness in the voice.

Chorus of passengers:—

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'How could you answer those insolent rascals?'

'They were not the least insolent, and they were perfectly justified in demanding their money.'

The voice said no more, and the figure relapsed into the shadows at the end of the boat. I could see nothing more of it. All the other passengers were engaged in commiserating themselves and each other for having been obliged to pay their fare. I sat back and smoked in silence, watching the lights and great outline of our ship grow larger as we slid over the water towards it. When the boat ground against the lowest step of the ladder I kept my seat and let the other passengers scramble past me. Twice I was respectfully requested to disembark by the boatmen, as my seat was nearest of all to the ladder, and twice I politely declined, and sat on waiting.

The boat completely emptied itself, and then

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at last the figure in the bows rose and came easily down the unsteady craft towards me. The long coat reached to the feet and fell in black rigid lines, but the form was a wonderfully symmetrical one, and I got up with alacrity and looked eagerly round the hood into the face as the figure approached me.

‘Can I assist you?’ and I held out my hand.

The boat was jarring up and down against the ship’s ladder uncertainly. A couple of Egyptians held it with their hands to the lowest rung waiting for us.

Two curiously light, brilliant eyes met mine from the pale smooth face enclosed by the hood.

‘Oh, thanks, very much,’ she said in a pleasant, half-derisive way, and a hand came on mine and held it firmly, and we both stepped from the rocking seat on to the steps. They were a broad flight, with a rope on either side,

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and I and my companion swung ourselves slowly up together.

My whole idea now was to say something which would elicit some information about her, but the tall form beside me in its impenetrable clothing seemed to exercise a confusing influence over me. My thoughts mixed themselves inextricably, and at last, when we were near the top of the ladder, I remarked simply :

‘I don't think I've seen you before?’

‘No, I have been ill with fever since we started. I have not emerged from my cabin.’

‘Are you near the centre of the ship?’

‘Yes, close to the centre on the left side.’

‘Left side? That's the men's side,’ I remarked carelessly.

‘Oh, they don't divide us very distinctly in these French boats!’

Confound it! Here we were at the head of the ladder.

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'Shall we stroll round the deck?' I said.
'It's really a lovely night. That fog is only
just on the surface of the water.'

She turned to me with a gleaming smile;
the light from the deck saloon windows fell full
on the face, across the scintillating eyes and
brilliant well-turned mouth.

'Yes, I've no objection,' came the careless
answer, and we stepped over the loose coils of
rope, passed through the opening in the chain,
and stood side by side on the deck. I noticed
my companion's shoulder was somewhat be-
neath my own.

I wished it had been rough weather, or our
ship out of gear and rolling, but we were lying
motionless in the bay, and there was no possible
excuse for offering one's arm.

'Would you object to my smoking?' I said,
as we turned towards the first-class passen-
gers' end, where, under the stretched awning,
in shadowy obscurity, stood deck-chairs of

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all descriptions, some vacant and some occupied.

My companion laughed. It was rather an affected, effeminate sort of laugh, and it irritated me. Perhaps it meant she smoked herself.

I got out my cigar-case and handed it first towards her.

‘Thanks, but I don't smoke.’

That was more encouraging. I lighted up, and we strolled on, my eyes keenly observant of her under dropped lids.

A wonderful carriage and walk, easy and self-reliant almost, but not quite to the point of arrogance, and, I felt sure, a lovely and seductive form under that hideous shapeless garment.

‘When do we leave to-night, do you know?’ she asked after a few minutes.

‘Midnight, I fancy,’ I answered.

‘Well, it's close to that now, I should think.

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I am going down, so that I can have a chance of settling to sleep before we start.'

'Oh, don't go down this minute,' I urged. 'I don't suppose we shall really set off much before morning.'

'Why did you just tell me midnight then?' she said amusedly, and then added: 'I believe you've had too many pegs!'

I laughed. All the time we had been walking towards the companion-stair, and I did not want to see her disappear down it.

'Look at the beauty of the night!' I persisted. 'Surely it's a pity to waste it by going below decks!'

'Yes, it is beautiful,' she said, stopping with her hand on the stair-rail and casting a long glance round the encircling purples of sky and sea; 'so beautiful that you should contemplate it in silence and alone.—Good-night.'

'Oh, let me see you to your cabin,' I said hastily.

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'And what about the beauty of the night? Surely it's a pity to waste it by coming below decks!'

'Orpheus descended even into Hades on a memorable occasion,' I returned. She was already half-way down the stairs, and I followed her to the lower passage.

At the foot of the steps she stopped and turned.

'Do you know my name?' she asked, with a faint intonation of surprise.

'No,' I said promptly; 'I wish I did!'

'Well, but what made you say that then?'

'Say what?' I asked.

'Why, about Orpheus!'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said in astonishment. 'You're not called Orpheus surely!' and we both laughed.

'No, but... Eurydice... I thought perhaps you knew and...'

'Oh no,' I said hastily; 'I had no idea!'

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What a curious coincidence! Is it really Eurydice? It's an awfully pretty name!'

'Not with the surname,' she answered, laughing. 'Eurydice Williamson! Isn't it a frightful combination!'

'I don't think so,' I maintained unblushingly, though the seven syllables in conjunction positively set my teeth on edge.

Down here there was a good deal of confusion, and evident signs of approaching departure; luggage that had not yet been transferred to its owner's cabin or the hold stood blocking up the fairly broad space between the lines of cabins on either side of the vessel; the rafters were close over our heads; behind us thudded the engine, sending down streams of oil-scent and hot air through the thick atmosphere.

There was no light but that which fell through the dim, smoke-stained glass of a lamp swung to a cross-beam over our head. It enabled us

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just to see where to put our feet and avoid the piles of luggage, odd oil-cans, and loose coils of rope lying in all direction's.

No one seemed down here. The passengers had for the most part disappeared into their cabins. The crew seemed wholly occupied on deck. Over our heads tramped perpetual hurried footsteps, chains were dragged, orders shouted, and goods pushed along the boards ; but down here all was an obscure, heated, smoke-filled dusk.

‘That is my cabin, I think,’ my companion said, and I saw a white painted door a little ahead of us with No. 36 printed on it.

Another minute and she would have passed through it, not to reappear for another twelve hours. I felt quite annoyed at the thought.

I glanced at the covered head and neck and shoulders beside me in a succession of rapid nervous glances, and each time rejected an importunate idea that kept suggesting itself

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again and again with maddening persist-
ency.

Then we were standing at the white-painted door, and she stretched her hand to the handle. 'Good-night,' she said, and she turned the pale contour of her face and its shining eyes upon me.

I felt dizzy with sudden excitement ; the face whirled before my eyes in the dingy air.

I bent over her on a mischievous, jesting impulse, pinned one shoulder against the cabin door, and leant my lips down to hers. She threw her head back violently to avoid them, and I heard the sharp blow of the skull on the woodwork.

The next second both her hands struck my chest, and pushed me backwards with desperate force.

She opened the door behind her, and the next instant its white boards were between us.

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I looked at them savagely for a second, then I collected myself and turned with a laugh to find my way out of this stifling, murky, circumscribed space.

I hurried up the companion-stair and turned on to the deck into the still, hot night.

Just as I did so the figure of my travelling companion came down towards me.

'I say! Dickinson!'

'Hullo!'

'Do you know who that person is, Williamson the name is, in No. 36 cabin?'

Dickinson stopped and stared at me.

'What have you been up to?' he said laconically after a minute's survey.

'Why?' I said evasively, feeling myself colour. 'How do you mean?'

'Well, you look rather excited. Come and have a drink.'

'Yes, I think I will,' I answered. 'But really, have you seen this passenger Williamson?'

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Upon my honour the dress was most extraordinary.'

'What on earth are you talking about?' Dickinson returned. 'I don't know whom you mean. All the passengers I've seen are a most ordinary lot.'

I saw he knew nothing about it, and that I could not get any information from him, and it suddenly occurred to me it was unwise to interest him too much in the Unknown. Dickinson was a good-looking fellow, and piqued himself on his skill and experience with women.

When he returned to the charge a minute later, as I kept silence, with 'Well, what's the joke? Come along, let's have it,' I answered: 'Oh, bother! I don't know. Let's get those drinks before the stewards go.'

Dickinson got the impression I was a little screwed, and I let him keep it. I took a couple of brandies and sodas with him in the saloon,

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talked a lot of nonsense to avoid rational conversation, and then got away to my own cabin, bolted the door, turned on the electric light, and flung myself on the couch under the window.

I made myself comfortable with a cushion under my head, and a first-rate Aden cigarette in my teeth, and stared up through the great square open port-window at the brilliant sky, which changed as the ship moved onward as a turning kaleidoscope.

I was thinking of the dead failure of that kiss, and I laughed outright as I recalled the sharp blow of the head on the woodwork.

'Fearful crack it must have been!' I thought.
'I shall be in for some terrific apology to-morrow, I expect.'

Of course my conduct had been terribly flippant and my levity quite reprehensible, but then a hard-worked Indian officer, going home on his first leave, is apt to be afflicted with a

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buoyancy of spirits. It is not a malady that attacks us very frequently in this life, but I had it badly just then.

Six years of honest hard labour in the East lay behind me.

One year's idleness at home, gilded with a thundering good income just come into, lay before me. In these circumstances, who would not feel a certain irresponsible gaiety?

I lay back contentedly, with my thoughts wandering to England and all I would do there, and with a comfortable conviction I was the luckiest fellow going.

The next morning I was at the breakfast-table punctually at nine, and I scanned the line of faces on either side with eager eyes, but the one I sought was absent.

For the whole two hours during which breakfast was served to relays of passengers I sat waiting with exemplary patience; but she did not appear, and when the stewards came to

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remove the cloth I went up-stairs, feeling vexed
and disappointed.

'Ill again, I suppose,' I thought, and began
to walk slowly up the deck.

Then as I glanced along the polished boards,
shining in the morning sunlight, suddenly I
saw her. My heart beat suddenly.

I felt the blood come to my face, and I
turned aside and leant over the rail, that I
might see for a moment without being seen.
Iron supports ran up from the side-railing to
which the awning was attached, and beside one
of these, round which a loose piece of canvas
furled and unfurled in the salt breeze, I stood
and looked along the deck.

She was sitting in a long chair reading. The
fierce light beating through the yellow canvas
fell warmly round her.

She was dressed in white serge, and the form
I had divined last night I clearly and exactly
realised with my vision now. Thin, as I had

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thought, but incomparably graceful, with a turn of the shoulder and a pose of the neck, that, as my eye caught it, seemed to arrest my very pulses.

She was wearing no hat, and the stray gleams of sunlight coming at intervals under the awning glittered on the dark hair, making it a confusion of gilt and ebony.

I paused a second or two to get rid of the look of triumphant pleasure I felt must be on my face, and then, summoning the most dejected expression I could, I walked hastily up towards her with a sort of contrite, desperately anxious air.

She continued to read till I was close beside her chair. I stopped and looked down upon her, and she glanced up at me.

Such a look came upon me from under the lids !

Sabres unsheathed, knives in the sunlight, and fires burnt blue, were none of them in it with that look, and as she transferred her eyes

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immediately to the book again, I almost expected to see the page shrivel under them. I felt rather shrivelled.

'Will you ever forgive me for last night?' I said in my gentlest tone. 'I have no words to say how I regret it.'

There was no response. I waited, watching the delicate angry scarlet receding and returning, glowing and suffusing itself, under the pale skin. I felt keenly, as it were, extra conscious of everything,—of the heat smiting down on us through the canvas, of the glare from the shimmering sea, of the buoyant roll of the ship as it cut through the blue turbulent water.

'What is there I can say or do? How can I earn your forgiveness?'

No answer.

The long figure and the satin head beneath me remained motionless.

'To forgive,' I murmured, 'is the divinest prerogative of the human being.'

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'On the contrary,' and the tone of the cold voice seemed literally to cut the sunny air, 'to respect itself.'

'One cannot respect oneself if one has no charity and no mercy,' I returned.

A slight shrug of the shoulders was the only answer.

I stood wondering what argument would tell with her most; then, taking my cue from her last words, I said in a low voice:

'At least there's one extenuation, not of my error perhaps, but of the injury to you: I did not succeed.'

The scarlet under her eyes deepened a little, and she answered curtly:

'No. If you had, I never could have forgiven you.'

My heart beat.

'But now you will?' I said, bending a little lower and throwing the most reverential anxiety into my tone.

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She was silent a few seconds, then she said decisively :

'Yes. Let us say no more with reference to it. I wish to forget such a thing was even possible.'

I was rather surprised at her summary dismissal of the subject. It was more a masculine than a feminine way of treating it.

I expected her to forgive me, but I thought that, like most women, she would have pottered round the matter at least half an hour first.

However, the surprise was pleasant, and I felt on the whole admiration for the way she had treated me. She had forgiven me, but she had made me feel distinctly that pardon was no invitation to err again, and her brief disposal of the matter seemed to me more convincing of her real anger than if she had maintained a show of implacable resentment.

I stood looking down upon her in silence,

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noting the tranquil forehead with not a line to mar it, from the sweep of the long eyebrows to the black silk-like rings of the hair at the pale oval of the face, lighted by the fleeting scarlet tints in the cheeks and the curious lustre of the eyes.

I turned and drew an empty chair up beside hers at the side of the deck and threw myself into it.

There was silence between us, and I made no effort to break it.

For those moments I delivered myself over to that sense of keen simple pleasure in life that comes upon all created beings at times, even the most wretched, like an unexpected gust of wind. The realisation comes suddenly that they live, and Life itself, distinct from circumstance and environment, is pure rapture.

I leaned back in the mellow light under the sun-smitten awning, the freshening breeze urg-

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ing on the flying steamer, the blue undulating billows rolling and swelling exuberantly as they bore us on. I felt the keen salt wind, full of vital life-giving principle, blow against my face, and I looked at this beautiful living object beside me in silence, realising the joy of existence.

‘I did not see you at breakfast this morning?’ I said at last.

‘No,’ she answered, with the slow brilliant smile I had noted last night. ‘I was ill. It is an horribly unpoetic thing to suffer from, sea-sickness—the sort of thing one would like to be specially exempted from by Providence, but I’m not, unfortunately.’

‘I don’t agree with your line of thought at all,’ I said, laughing. ‘I think those people that are above the ordinary weaknesses of human nature are hateful:—people with seraphic constitutions, that never catch an honest cold, nor have toothache, are never

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sea-sick, and never look seedy. It's annoying to ordinary mortals.'

The girl laughed.

'Men don't generally like a woman to look seedy.'

'I don't know. I think pain and suffering on a beautiful face accentuate its beauty, and it gives opportunity to soothe and console. I think a perfectly independent person is always irritating and unattractive.'

She turned to me with a marked elevation of her eyebrows and a brilliant, derisive mockery in her eyes.

'Do you mean to intimate you are sympathetic?'

'I think I am rather.'

'You surprise me!'

'Why?' I asked.

'I never met a man who was so yet.'

'I am sure you must have had tremendous experience!' I said mockingly, watching the

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vermilion, elliptical lines of her mouth form and vanish and form again as she smiled and talked.

‘Perhaps not,’ she answered. ‘A little goes a long way.’

She spoke with a charming smile and in a light, easy tone, but my ear detected the accent of genuine contempt in it—not the emphasised contempt displayed for bravado of something really half admired, but the indulgent contempt of absolute indifference.

And it stimulated me. I was so thoroughly accustomed to the anxious servility which characterises the ordinary young girl's conversation with men that this new tone of faint, slighting disdain struck me directly.

It was not pleasant; on the contrary, it was irritating and uncomfortable, but at least it was a change.

I did not answer, but just leant back and looked at her, and wondered what was the source of this contempt.

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I felt it was not the mere arrogance of a good-looking woman accustomed to flattery and attention.

That subtle inflexion of scorn in the clear voice was the unconscious expression of a genuine indifference for that which is known to be worthless.

And I felt, too, as I watched the gleaming eyes that had turned from mine, and were now absently fixed on the distant sky-line, that there was another spring to this emotion—a knowledge of worth within herself.

Our chairs remained side by side all through the morning, and we talked in a lazy, desultory way at intervals without either of us taking the trouble to sustain a continuous conversation, and when the luncheon-bell rang we went down together, to find that we sat opposite each other.

That evening after dinner I strolled up on deck. It seemed too hot for the smoking-

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room to be attractive—besides, where was Eurydice? Instinctively I wanted to see her again.

The middle part of the deck, where I came up, seemed deserted, and I stood for a minute at the side, noting the splendour of the night. It was the splendour of the tropics.

A huge saffron moon rolled downwards through the purple sky that hung low over the ship, like a dark, inflated curtain, and seemed to quiver and pulsate with the ceaseless, restless light of its stars and planets.

The air was heavy and oppressive, almost sulphurous, like the air at the mouth of a crater.

As I stood watching the indolent, black water undulating silently away to the dark horizon, the faint, tinkling notes of a banjo came down to me from the forward part of the ship.

I listened, and then the words reached me,

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'She told me her age was five-and-twenty!'
sung with much spirit and rapidity.

I laughed and walked forward in the direction of the sound.

The passengers had gathered at this end of the ship, and were clustered together in groups or lines in their deck-chairs.

It was dusky; there was no artificial light here, and the moon, hastening headlong downwards to the sea, only gave an uncertain, transverse light across the smooth rolling waves.

I wound in and out amongst the chairs, following the sound, and reached a little group of four at the extreme end of the vessel.

One of that group was Eurydice. She was sitting looking down the ship, and she smiled as she saw me come up.

She was sitting on a camp-stool seemingly, and leaning against the bulwarks. Dickinson and another man were balanced on the top bar

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of the rail, and a girl of about nineteen sat cross-legged on the deck, the banjo she had just finished playing in her lap, and the cigar she had just lighted in her mouth.

All were smoking, in fact, except Eurydice. Beside them, on an empty tar-barrel turned up, stood four cups of coffee and a slim liqueur-bottle.

Dickinson looked across at me from his perch and laughed.

'Don't you think we look comfortable?' he asked.

'Extremely,' I said, glancing over them.
'Shall I disturb you?'

'Not a bit,' answered the girl with the banjo.
'Come and sit down *à la Afghan*, it's a nice steady position, and have a cigar!'

She looked up at me smiling, and laid her hand on the deck beside her with a gesture of invitation. I glanced down upon her. She was handsome, very, or at any rate looked so

at that moment, with her eyes full of animated impertinence, a flush on either cheek, and the light brown curls of her close-cropped hair gently stirred by the night wind as the rolling ship bore onwards.

She had disdained to dress for dinner, and still wore her morning shirt and collar, with a man's red tie knotted round her neck, and she sat cross-legged with the cigar in her mouth, reminding one of the American girl, slang, modern fastness, and other disagreeable things.

I looked at the woman directly facing her. Eurydice was leaning forward, her elbow resting on her knee and her chin supported on her hand, looking down the length of the ship. Her black hair was parted in the middle and lay heavy above the narrow forehead and long eyebrows.

Her arms and neck were bare, and their whiteness hardly defined itself from the whiteness of her dress.

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Just so might the real Eurydice have sat and looked, gazing down one of the green alleys of Greece. The thought shot across me for one moment, and it seemed while these two women sat opposite each other as if two centuries had been brought face to face, the century of Orpheus and the nineteenth, and the intermediate centuries no longer rolled between.

I felt disinclined to plant myself cross-legged beside this girl and smoke beneath this other woman's eyes, and I glanced round for a chair.

Failing this there was a second empty barrel which I drew close to Eurydice's side and sat down.

A slight contraction of her eyebrows answered the hot flush that leapt to the other girl's face as I refused her invitation, and I saw Eurydice resented the slight to her friend.

A glance at the two faces was enough to guide me, and I leant forward to the girl with a smile.

'It isn't everyone who can sit *à la Afghan* with the same grace and look as graceful as you do.'

The girl laughed and twitted round a peg of the banjo.

'Well, take care you don't topple off that tar-barrel; that will look less graceful still!' she answered, and there was a general laugh.

'Sing us something else, Amy,' Eurydice said after a minute.

'I've come to the end of my *répertoire*,' the girl returned.

'You sing something,' and she handed the banjo up towards her companion, holding it by the neck.

Eurydice laid a white hand on the silver edge of the instrument as it touched her knees.

'I can't sing to the banjo,' she said, smiling. 'I would if my guitar were here.'

'Can I fetch it for you?' I said hastily.

'Oh no, I won't trouble you,' she said.

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The other girl sprang to her feet.

'I'll go,' she said, 'I know where it is,' and she disappeared.

It seemed quite natural that that little girl should race away to fetch the guitar while the other leant back undisturbed.

The men smoked in silence. Eurydice said nothing, and her eyes were turned away from us to the lustrous Southern sky. She was one of those peculiar people who don't speak unless they have something to say. As for me, I felt a remark addressed to her ought to be one really worth listening to, and not being prepared with one to meet such an unusual requirement, I also stared respectfully at the stars and said nothing.

After a few seconds the girl came back with the guitar.

'Thank you so much, dear,' Eurydice said, as she took it; and I envied that girl as I heard.

There was another interval while Eurydice

raised the strings and tuned them ; then suddenly, when the whole was in accord, she looked up from the instrument.

'I don't think it's much use my singing after all,' she said. 'It will only depress you. All my songs are so melancholy.'

There was an eager chorus of persuasion.

'Oh, do,' said the girl, who had taken up her position again at the other's feet.

'It won't depress us. What does it matter? —there's nothing in a song.'

Eurydice said no more. She struck a few notes, and I recognised the opening of Schubert's *Adieu*.

A complete silence fell on us. No one stirred.

The men ceased even to smoke, and in an absolute hush the first liquid notes of the *Adieu* came to us, seeming to divide softly the still dark air.

Her voice was incomparable in speaking

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even, and exercised a great influence over me, and now as the stream of sound swelled from her throat and flowed from her lips, each delicate musical note seemed like a link in a chain of subtle enchantment falling on me as I heard

‘Farewell, thou waitest for me,
Soon, soon I shall depart.’

She was singing with no music, and her gaze looked out straight before her in the night. As she sang those words, a tremor as of passionate agonised longing vibrated through them. They came from her parted lips as the restless sigh of a spirit longing to escape.

The long-drawn sorrowful notes, and the indefinable accent of sadness she weighted them with, went down the length of the ship, and slowly from all parts of it the passengers gathered silently and pressed round in a circle to listen.

Glancing round at the end of the first verse, I saw our little group was surrounded by a ring of eager hearers.

As the last note of the voice died, no one stirred or spoke; the sobbing accompaniment of the guitar was the only sound.

Eurydice, evidently absolutely oblivious of her audience, absorbed in the rapt enthusiasm of the song, played on that marvellous music of Schubert that represents so exactly the convulsive sobs, the falling tears of the lover at the death-bed of his love.

And Eurydice played it, with the strings thrilling and quivering under her passionate touch till the sense of music was lost, and only the great agonised sobs of a breaking human heart seemed throbbing through the night.

The crowd stood motionless, breathless, as one man. Every face was pale, Eurydice's own was blanched to the tint of death, her

throat and bosom heaving, her eyes swimming in tears as she raised them towards the East to commence the last verse.

‘Farewell until the dawning of the Eternal Day.’

There was no tremor now in the perfect voice: it welled upwards in a strain of ecstatic triumph, growing louder and clearer in a rapture of Faith, then it sank slowly with the words

‘The day that shall re-unite me
For ever unto thee,’

with an infinite resignation in its tone, and the last line came softly to us as a mere breath, a sigh of tenderness, dying in its own measureless sadness.

For some minutes there was no sound or movement amongst her audience, then everybody drew a long breath, and Eurydice herself started up with a smile, and the tears glistening on her cheeks.

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'A most artistic performance!' said a man next me.

The others clapped enthusiastically. Eurydice holding the guitar, tried to see an exit, but she was completely closed in by an admiring circle.

'Oh do grant us another.'

'Oh do sing once more.'

But Eurydice was immovable.

'No, I can't, really,' she said smiling, in answer, and then, as they pressed further—

'I can't; I'm not up to it.'

I looked keenly at her as I heard, and I saw it was the simple truth: her slight hand quivered nervously on the neck of the guitar and the other arm that hung at her side trembled visibly; her face had not recovered its natural colouring.

Conventional expressions of regret on all sides followed this statement, soothing murmurs of admiration and sympathy circulated

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round her, and the groups of men reluctantly parted and made way for her to pass through them.

I said nothing nor stirred from my original position, but I rose as she passed and looked at her, and our glance met for a second.

'I am so glad you liked it,' she said with a smile, answering my eyes.

The little girl with the banjo followed her, and the two women disappeared.

'Remarkably fine voice, so flexible.'

'Yes, she's a thorough artist too.'

'She rather overstrained herself.'

'Who is she?'

'She joined the ship at Aden. . . .'

I walked away, disliking to hear her commented upon, and made my way to another part of the ship and sat down in an ownerless deck-chair close to the bulwarks.

I leant back, the *Adieu* still ringing in my ears, those sobbing notes still beating through

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my brain, and the delicate, finely cut scarlet lips that had uttered them still before my vision.

It was not long before Dickinson found me out.

He came sauntering up with his hands in his pockets and a cigarette in his teeth.

'So there you are,' he exclaimed.

'When you disappeared, I thought you were overcome with your feelings. I rushed down to your cabin with a smelling-bottle and Miss Williamson's *eau de cologne* to revive you.'

'Not quite so bad as that,' I answered idly.

'Everybody's cleared off now,' he remarked; 'come and take a turn round. I find one gets confoundedly little exercise on board ship.'

I got up and lighted a cigar and joined him.

'Do you know, I always thought it impossible I should marry,' I said as we walked

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along the silent, deserted deck. 'I always hated the idea; I never could understand how men could . . . but I believe I do understand now.'

'And the charming Dicey has helped to enlighten you I suppose?' answered Dickinson mockingly.

'Well, it is very odd,' I said, following up the thread of my own reflections, and indifferent to his chaff.

'Of all the women I've known, admired, even loved, I suppose in a way, there has not been one who has not caused me a shudder when I've imagined her just for an instant as my wife, boxed up with me in perpetuity, not one . . . until now.'

'And you mean this, what's her name, Eurydice is the one whom you'd rather fancy in the position?'

'Oh, I don't know that I go as far as that, but she's certainly totally different from any

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other woman I've ever met. I mean I can imagine her carrying a man away into any folly—even marriage.'

'Yes. She is a divine creation, I admit, most impressive and very nice at a safe distance, but do you know I think she'd be rather an awful sort of person to marry! Fancy coming home late, drunk, and seeing her sitting waiting for one with that marble face and those level eyebrows.'

'Well,' I answered with a quick flush of pleasure as a vision of her, so waiting, and rising with soft arms outstretched in greeting, formed itself before me at his words. 'But it isn't everyone who wants to come home late, drunk.'

Dickinson laughed good-naturedly.

'Quite right, old man, it isn't. I daresay she'd do all right for you; the little one is more my style, she's a touch of the barmaid about her: keep you cheerful.'

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'But we were talking about marriage,' I persisted. 'Surely when one marries one does not want a repetition of the women one may have known before marriage?'

'Yes, I should,' observed Dickinson sententiously. 'I like what I am accustomed to.'

'Oh, of course, if you do!' I rejoined, with a shrug of my shoulders. 'I should prefer a change.'

'You'll certainly get it,' laughed Dickinson, 'out of Miss Williamson. I should say she's unique.'

I stopped and leant over the bulwarks, looking through the violet darkness of the night, and Dickinson paused beside me, kicking the lowest iron rail with his foot.

'I say, I find it's getting rather chilly! Don't you think the smoking-room would be an improvement?'

I did not think it would, and said so.

'I see you are determined on doing the

sentimental, so I won't stay and disturb you,' and he strolled away down towards the saloon.

I leant there thinking ; perhaps I was in a sentimental mood. At any rate I felt no inclination to sleep, if that is any sign of it, and I was indifferent to the chilliness of the air, though the coldest hour of the night was approaching. I felt the night dew lying thickly on the bulwarks, and my own clothes were wet with it.

I was thinking of Dickinson's words, 'she's unique.'

Certainly she was different, incomparably different, from every other woman I had met, and her influence upon me different from that which any other woman had possessed over me, and I asked myself with a half-mocking smile, 'Was she,' perhaps in accordance with the theory of the greatest writer upon love in all the ages, 'the missing portion of my own broken and incomplete being, that craved to recover

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her and take her again to itself and to restore its wholeness and entirety ?'

As I stood there balancing idly with myself questions to which the human brain is inexorably forbidden to supply the answer, faint, broken shafts of light began to tremble above the dark line of the horizon in the East, and I turned to it to watch with curious eyes the rising of the Young Day.

Slowly the overhanging blackness of the night and the reflected blackness of the sea lightened, and the whole darkness of the sky at the first touch of dawn seemed to quiver even as a great curtain grasped by some vast, withdrawing hand.

Slowly, imperceptibly, with invisibly vanishing folds, the veil was gathered back, and the shadowy surface of the wide, dim mirror of the sea gleamed faintly with translucent, opaline, tints of grey.

Then, suddenly, as swords flashed from their

sheaths, shot up three bars of crimson light obliquely from the dark sea line to the empyrean, transforming the uncertain, trembling pallor and shades of the water into one soft, subtle mysterious harmony of mauve.

Smooth, almost motionless, the sea lay, yet swelling, palpitating gently, trembling and blushing under the caresses of the Dawn. For some moments, the water stretched, a glimmering circle of violet to the horizon, then, unhesitatingly, triumphantly, with overpowering sovereignty, the great Day rose in its mantle of clear light.

The purples and the shadows fled, the wavering tints and shades vanished into one brilliance of purest gold, the sea seemed to laugh openly as the fresh day breeze swept over it.

Small crests of white foam leapt up and smiling dimples and hollows sparkled between.

The subdued and tender sadness, the ever

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marvellous mystery of the dawn was past. It
was glad, joyous, certain Morning that smiled
now upon the sea.

I raised my arms from the railing and turned
to go down to my cabin, a confident gladness
in my heart.

Full of human egoism, I felt vaguely as if
this heavenly awakening was typical of the
dawn of a new era in my life.

CHAPTER II

A WEEK had gone by, and day by day Eurydice and I had sat side by side on the deck talking ; in the morning with the sun beating fiercely on the awning, in the afternoon with its rich, yellow glare thrown back from the water, in the evening with the cool, faint moonlight falling on us, and at night when the moon had disappeared, under the steady glow of the stars.

Two philosophers in ancient Athens could hardly have discoursed more indefatigably in one of their covered walks than she and I upon that covered deck.

The great charm of these conversations was their pure impersonality. We discussed anything and everything except ourselves, our lives, or our experiences ; and this fact set our

52 THE WOMAN WHO DIDN'T conversation on a different level from any I had held before.

We were nothing while we talked, our opinions, theories, arguments, were everything. We were like parents losing themselves in the identity of their children. And this sort of talk, this mental contact with a mind like Eurydice's, was a novel and delightful experience for me.

She was clever, with a tremendous power for thought in her brain and a peculiar gift for its expression on her lips, and her influence on my own intellect was very great.

She roused it from the apathy into which it had sunk during six years of the empty, frivolous life of an army man in India. When with her, those six years seemed taken off my life.

She seemed to reinfuse through my brain the vigour it had had at six-and-twenty. And her influence on my moral being was as great.

In every word, in every sentence she uttered, in the whole length of those dispassionate conversations we had, there was gradually unfolded before me the beauty of an elevated, and yet extremely sympathetic character, and all the better part of my own was drawn irresistibly towards it.

Going back to my cabin from where we had been sitting forward, on this seventh night of our acquaintance, I knew that I loved her, and loved her with the best and noblest love one human being can feel for another, the love that has its roots in reverence and its fruits in devotion,—the love that thinks only of the object, and will deny its own to gain its idol's pleasure. To her I would dedicate my life, if she would accept the dedication, and I thought of it with the passionate enthusiasm of youth, with the ardour of self-devotion and worship that is an innate though hidden trait of human nature.

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Hidden, little seen perhaps, because so rarely is the worthy object for worship found.

Seven days! Not long a time in which to know and judge another, but I was satisfied. Every instinct, every voice within me, told me this was a woman not merely that I could love but one that I could worship. And I believed that she would accept both love and worship from me. I believed she was drawn to me as I to her with a strong inclination that I would set myself to turn into love.

I was over thirty, but I felt less than twenty that night as I walked back to my cabin thinking of her with the first fresh light of Love breaking into my life.

The following evening after dinner, I went to find her as usual, but, for the first time, with an uncertain tremor of feeling, because for the first time a personal prayer was on my lips.

I went slowly along the deck. The boards

were steady and level as the boards of a ballroom. The night was dark but breathless ; the sea gleamed, smooth and almost motionless, on either side, just faintly rising and swelling like the bosom of a woman asleep.

Ahead of me, rose the masts with their intricate masses of rigging spun like a gigantic web across the star-spangled sky, and half-way up the mast swung an electric light, pouring a shower of tremulous transverse rays through the cordage.

Beneath it, in the full flood of light, that seemed to descend upon her like a mantle of silver, she was sitting idly.

There were a good many other passengers on the deck, the majority strolling up and down in twos and twos, some sitting at small deck tables playing cards or chess.

A group of well-dressed girls, surrounded with a semicircle of young men on chairs,

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were sitting smoking and drinking at the far end in the shadow, their thin laughter diffused with their cigarette smoke in the warm, languid air.

She, the handsomest woman on board, sat idle, silent, and alone. Instinctively my feet quickened.

She looked up as I approached with a slow soft smile that struck me vaguely as the most sad that I had seen yet upon her face.

My own heart beat as I met it, for a second my voice died, dried, suffocated in my throat.

'How long you have been!' she murmured with the smile still on her mouth, and the low tone seemed like a sigh on the night air.

Fire, not blood, seemed rushing through my veins.

I looked round, guided by some serviceable mechanical instinct, and drew a chair close beside and parallel to hers, and threw myself into it. Thus we were screened from view by

the mast and some vacant chairs that had been piled against it.

I looked at her, looked at the leant-back head with its weight of brilliant hair, turned just so much towards me as to suggest a faint longing to rest near mine, at the line of the nostril, slightly dilated, at the trembling lashes, and the pallor of the delicious throat with the uncertain light playing over it.

No word was said, but on the bare arm that lay along the chair-rest by mine, I laid my hand.

'Have you been waiting for me?' I said.

'Yes,' came back as a breath, from her lips that hardly parted to say it.

That one moment when this soft, weak word came to my ears was perhaps the supremest of unmixed joy in my life. For that single instant the promise of pleasure shone out clear and distinct, denuded of its inexorable pains and penalties and setters.

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The future and the past were obliterated, mere blots, that single point of time enclosed nothing but the spontaneous irresponsible delight of nature.

Swayed and dominated by it, and passionately conscious of her presence, her proximity, her vitality, her personality, and oblivious of all else, I leant my elbow on her chair.

‘And now dearest, I am here.’

I felt her arm glow and quiver suddenly under my fingers.

A sudden relaxation, like the loosening of a musical string, passed through her form, almost a collapse, and the lovely head turned from me.

‘Pray don't,’ she murinured, and the voice seemed suffocated with suppressed tears.

Blinded and confused with my own feelings, and lost in my own sense of triumphant satisfaction, I hardly was conscious of surprise or wonder, and I answered half jestingly:

'Why do you turn away? Love always pursues a fugitive.'

That word seemed to break some bond that had been holding her. She started and sat upright, throwing my hand from her arm, and turned her face to me.

It was deathlike, and in the steel-coloured, wavering light, her eyes blazed upon me through the crowding tears.

'How can you say that word to me?'

I was dismayed and startled. I looked back at her, not knowing what her meaning was.

Then as a half-drunk man, when called to account, confusedly recalls his words, not because he sees their folly, but because he dimly knows his power of judgment is gone, I suddenly mistrusted what I had said, what I had intimated, what my glance had been in that first great impulse of passion.

Intoxicated still, and not thinking clearly, I felt she thought in some way her dignity

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offended, and I said hurriedly: 'Why, when
we were saying yesterday there was nothing
so divine as married love?'

'But,' and her voice was breathless, the one
sentence seemed to break from her beating
breast painfully as if she had been stabbed
there. 'You must know . . . I *am* married.'

There was silence. An unbreakable silence
in which we sat motionless, almost breathless,
facing each other, staring at each other,—our
gaze locked in each other's.

In me the power to move or speak was
killed. The very life seemed suspended
in me.

Married! That strained whisper had reached
my brain and paralysed it.

The word struck in on the eager joy, the
confident elation, on all the delightful confusion
of feeling within me and instantaneously de-
stroyed it.

And in the sudden void there were left two

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struggling emotions, one the sense of mad incredulity, the other the conviction that it was true.

I knew in those terrible moments clearly that it was so somehow in some incomprehensible way.

There had been some error somewhere. It would be explained to me later: what did it matter? I glanced at her ringless hands indifferently. I had no power to feel anger.

All emotion was lost, all feelings made level in one sickening blank.

At last the sense of mere physical life and power came back to me. My brain was stunned and deadened still, but mechanical actions became possible.

'No, I swear I did not know it,' I said quietly, and I got up and left her.

I walked down the same side of the steamer I had passed up a few moments back, the same sound of laughter from the far end

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reaching me, the same light circles of smoke drifting down beside me, the same calm night upon the water round, only now there was a hell within me.

As I walked on, I met Dickinson by the saloon door.

'Coming to the smoking-room?' he said.

'No. I've rather a bad head. I'm going down,' I answered.

Dickinson looked at me.

'Sorry. You look seedy. What's she been doing to you?' he added mockingly.

I shrugged my shoulders and passed him in silence.

Then I glanced back over my shoulder and saw him walking decisively in her direction. I went on downstairs with a smile.

I entered my own cabin and crossed to the window, folded my arms there and leant with my head upon them, letting the revolt of feeling have its way.

Married! this woman.

The word stirred a mad unreasoning rebellion within me. A rebellion of all those finer, purer, more tender instincts that had sprung up round the main passionate impulse of love for her—this girl as I had thought her.

The gentleness, the reverence, the consideration that ran through all my thoughts regarding her, and that I had sedulously encouraged and cultivated for her sake, had been like delicate flowers growing on the sides of a volcano and co-existent with the subterranean flames.

And as in an eruption of the volcano the flowers perish, are annihilated and obliterated in the flow of boiling lava, so now all those holier, more tender impulses, sank submerged under the liberated tide of the underlying passion.

It was not, as I recognised in an agony of self-abasement, that my love for her was dying, it was changing.

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Her words could not kill it, but they would transform it.

Its extinction I would have welcomed, its metamorphosis I knew and dreaded.

It must have been a long time that I stood there, but of how long I was unconscious, and at last, breaking the silence, and startlingly distinct in it came a hesitating tap at the door.

It was a gentle knock, but the sound went through the cabin and sent the blood across my face. I turned and paused irresolute. Should I open the door or not? I felt a distinct distaste to see this woman then.

I waited, and half unconsciously I expected the knock to be repeated.

It was not, however, and, stimulated by the thought that she had gone, I walked to the door and threw it open.

She had not gone. She was standing there, and the light from the electric burner fell

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sharply on her. The passage and all beyond her was in darkness.

We both stood for a second in silence, and I noted her face stone-white except for the scarlet line of the lips.

I felt I could have struck her as she stood there.

'May I speak to you . . . explain . . .' she faltered.

'I don't think there's much use in talk,' I said shortly.

'Perhaps not,' she answered, with a touch of the familiar satire. 'Come and talk all the same!'

I stood irresolute, unwilling to go, but she was the woman I loved, and she said come, and I went.

We passed through the passage together and found our way to the companion-stair.

She stumbled twice beside me in the darkness, and twice I caught her arm to steady her.

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When we reached the deck she crossed to the side and leant against the rail, holding to it as if for support. I folded my arms on the iron bar and looked away from her, down on the black dividing water beneath us where the phosphorus rose, gleamed, scintillated, and passed as the ship flew forward.

A warm breath seemed to come against our faces from the heaving, ever-varying smooth salt surface. I would not look at her, but the keen, sensitive side-vision of the eye gave me her image as she stood beside me, and that was all I saw.

'So you didn't know I was married?' she said at last in a weak, hurried tone.

'Of course I did not! married women usually wear their wedding-ring!'

'I lost it the second day I came on board,' she answered; 'in the bathroom, I was using cold water, and my hands were very cold. I suppose it slipped off then. At least I could not find it afterwards, and I could not replace

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it on board ship, but my name was down on the list of passengers as Mrs. Williamson, and so of course I . . . I thought . . . ?

'I don't study the list of passengers,' I said coldly.

There was silence for a long time, and then she said timidly :

'I think you 're angry with me.'

'I suppose I have no right to be angry,' I returned bitterly ; 'but it seems odd after all our conversation together that the subject should never have come up.'

'My marriage is not such a pleasant thing that I am always thinking and talking of it,' she said, with a short laugh.

'Don't you care for the man?' I said after a minute, and the surge of struggling emotions within me and the restraint upon them all made my voice sound hard and cold.

'Care for him!' and the contemptuous laugh said the rest.

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'Why did you marry him, then?' I said dully. 'A woman like you could have had anybody.'

'No; that's just where you make the mistake!' she said vehemently. 'That is what a man always says to a woman who is decent looking and young; but those things do not last, and a girl's time is not long enough for her to make her choice in. Hardly a girl in a thousand marries the man she would choose. I did not. From fifteen upwards I have had offers from men I did not care for, nor want, and at twenty-three I accepted one of them from the man who pleased me most. I thought it did not matter. I had ceased to expect to meet a man I really loved—I had seen so many in those eight years, I was getting to think I expected too much from life, that love, as I imagined it, did not perhaps exist at all, that, in waiting for something imaginary, I should let the reality pass by me. Don't you see,' she said im-

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patiently, 'what a woman's position is? You men only care for youth and beauty! Nothing else weighs a straw with you! Character, intellect, virtue, they are practically as nothing to you. You teach a woman that, so she knows she must either marry in her twenties or face all the rest of her life alone. I waited eight years—then I married without love, and now, one year after . . . we have met.

'Is it not the ordinary rule of life, just the ordinary mockery of fate, everything comes just a little, and only a little, too late?

'He does not care for me,' she continued bitterly. 'I am nothing to him now, in fact I have not been since . . . since . . . oh, well, I don't know when his fancy for me died; at the end of the first month of our married life, I think, and when I realised it . . . the fearful blank that overspread everything—I seemed to see the future like a huge trackless desert before me stretching up even to the edge of

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my grave, and he, he shares his life with other women!'

'Then why do you not get a divorce?' I asked, a sudden ray of hope breaking upon me at her words. 'Surely your self-respect, the self-respect of any woman, should urge that!'

'How can I?' she said simply. 'He is not cruel.'

She looked at me as she spoke, and in those few words I read the whole tragedy of this woman's life. I understood, and I said nothing. What can one say against these laws of life?

'He has never sworn in my presence and never struck me,' she continued quietly, as if pursuing her own thoughts, and then, as an exclamation of anger escaped me, she looked up quickly and said: 'Why? It would be the kindest thing he could do. I have often looked at him and longed for a blow, though even then I am not sure I would get a divorce if I could.'

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'Why not?' I asked, with another question burning on my lips that they refused to frame.

'Because,' she said in a low voice, 'to me marriage is the holiest of all sacraments and divorce is a sacrilege.'

I was surprised, and I looked at her in wonder.

Unmoved and seemingly unconscious of my gaze she stood, a slight white figure leaning against the rail, with the measureless, abysmal blackness of the sea beneath and before her, and the fathomless gloom of the night above and around her. Her arms were folded motionless upon the bar; her eyes, turned away from me, looked out into the darkness.

Had the words come from a woman happy in her life, happy in her love, they would hardly have struck me, but from her lips, the lips of a woman who had suffered, was at this moment suffering acutely through this very marriage she termed the holiest of all sacra-

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ments, those words had tremendous weight, and revealed still further to me the great impersonality of this mind I loved.

'But surely,' I urged, 'when he has so far broken the ties, then you also are free.'

'Hardly, I think,' she said in the level voice of one who has passed through and left behind doubt and question, whose decisions are immutably formed, and whose acting on them has become almost mechanical. 'He has broken them in secret, but divorce breaks them in public. You see,' she added, and her voice became intensely grave, 'suppose I take the communion with another, and I see that he spills the wine. I would not overturn the table for that reason.'

I was silent. The solemnity of her manner half awed me, and checked all personal and selfish arguments. When I spoke, it was with a weak evasiveness.

'If you left him surely the world even would

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not condemn you. At least you would have the sympathy of all those whose sympathy is worth having.'

'And what then?' she said with an accent of surprise. 'I don't live for the world's sympathy, I live for my own duty. To be true to myself is my principle, and the only guide I have,' she added, turning fully to me, and the tremendous force and power that looked out from the light brilliant eyes seemed to beat down personal thought in my brain and hold me, merely listening. 'Always to do that which I consider right and honourable, independent of loss or gain, or praise or condemnation. Others may say what they please, for their opinion I care not at all, but my own good opinion I must have. I could not live without it. I must feel always that I have nothing to reproach myself with; and if I left him I should reproach myself. The fact that he has sinned does not give me a licence to sin also.'

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Besides, even supposing for one instant that I felt myself justified in leaving him, I would not ; for, if I did, my example might make the way easier for another woman less justified, or even not justified at all, to desecrate her word. I have given mine once, and now I am bound by it until Death releases me.'

'And yet you can praise Marriage as a glorious institution.' The words were stung out of me by the pressure of my own feelings, said in spite of my self-control, and brought regret the moment after.

Her white face became even whiter, and I saw her tremble visibly with nervous excitement as she hesitated for a moment, seeking words to defend that which she considered holy against my sneer.

'Yes,' she answered passionately, 'It is : I have always thought so, and think so still. The fact that I have through folly or misfortune rendered myself unhappy by its means

does not blind me to its value. Because the gift of gold is sometimes ruin to a man, would you deny that gold is gold? As a sacrament married life is holy; as a theory it is perfect. In practice, perhaps, it is not always either, for humanity is neither holy nor perfect, but blame Humanity for that, not Marriage. Love, absolute love, is so difficult to find, only to be obtained by the fortunate, to be envied by the unfortunate, but if you have found it, then surely this marriage that it's the fashion to laugh at, this knitting together for ever of the two half lives, this absolute dedication each to the other, this open unashamed union, blessed and ratified in the sight of all men, this undenied and eternal devotion and surrender of the two existences to each other, surely this is the most satisfying sphere in which two love-inspired minds can move. Think what it might have been, would have been, if we had entered it together!'

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She was facing me now, and her form seemed suddenly taller, dilated with the strength of feeling moving her.

In the darkness that had grown and grown as we stood there, I could still see the pallid suffering face raised to mine.

Involuntarily I made a step towards her with outstretched arms; all the best part of human love, all in it that most nearly reflects the Divine, roused and stirred in me. I forgot my anger against her of an hour back.

Even myself and my own personal passion for her sank into my in many oblivion. For that instant I worshipped rather than loved her.

She stepped back from me farther into the gloom of the body of the ship, and farther away from the slight reflected light that came from the water.

'No, don't follow me,' she said in a suffocated voice. 'There is nothing, nothing now for us, but separation.'

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With the last word she vanished ; the black background seemed to divide for a moment and then close again between me and her. When I went forward there was black space only and the hanging cords of the rigging.

The next days contained an indescribable, almost indefinable suffering for me, caged on board face to face with Eurydice, never separated by more than a few feet of space, seeing her with my physical eyes, hearing her voice, brushed by her dress, and yet conscious of that relentless wall between us, invisible, intangible, impalpable, and yet horribly real, as some overpowering presence in a nightmare.

There were five more days of the voyage before us, and on the first, as I came into the breakfast-room, pale and heavy-eyed, and took my place opposite her, as I sat through the déjeuner facing her across the narrow table on which our plates nearly touched, I slowly realised the rock to which I was bound.

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'Good God!' was the first thought that went through me, as I felt an intolerable impulse rise in me to escape from her proximity. 'Is it possible that another personality can have dominated me so far?'

Last night the way had seemed hard but clear. She was married. She was absolutely another's, and therefore of no use to me, and should have been, according to my reason, of no interest for me. This had seemed so clear to me last night. It was not so clear now. On the contrary, I felt that this woman who could never be anything, whom, now, I did not even wish to be anything to me, had yet an absorbing, overpowering interest for me. The thought of her filled my mind to running over, just as her presence, her image, seemed to weigh upon my physical senses. Before the breakfast was one-third over I pushed away my unfinished coffee and untouched plate and got up. I left the saloon and went on deck, to the extreme

point forward and leant there. I was surprised, angered, annoyed, to feel that my whole mental being seemed overstraining and stronger than the control I put upon it.

Last night I had confessed to myself, I had told myself openly—the thing is at an end—all is over, and this woman has no further attraction for you. You are now face to face with a temptation which to yield to would blacken, in your own eyes, your conscience for ever. Trample on the idea now and stamp it out finally, and I had thought I could, in adherence to my principles. Most men have some principles, since principles are nothing more than obstinate prejudices against certain acts, and a high-principled man means nothing more than an individual whose prejudices are very obstinate, very numerous, and against those acts which the community he happens to be living in is also prejudiced against. And, like the rest, I had several prejudices, which I called

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my principles, and the chief amongst them perhaps was the one in question now.

To seduce another's wife was an idea that in itself revolted me; rather unreasonably, since the accomplishment was fashionable in the regiment and in the station I had come from; but, in spite of my training, it still seemed to me an act tinged with disgrace and dishonour, an act mean and as utterly impossible to myself as to steal a friend's money or to forge his name. And it seemed so to me still.

I felt an intense revolt from it in my whole nature that no temptation and no passion could overcome.

Impossible! yes, it was simply that and nothing less than that, and I knew it.

But why, then, this overwhelming domination of the mind by the thought of an impossibility? I leant hard on the rails and looked down into the fathomless depths of green water seething at the vessel's side—not more fathomless than

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the psychology of one poor feeble human being. It is not the function of the sane mind to dwell upon a desire which is absolutely beyond its attainment, and once convinced of the entire helplessness of a project it usually has no difficulty in losing its grasp upon it, yet here my mind seemed gripped as in a vice, paralysed by a desire that I knew was absolutely vain.

It was extraordinary, the indefinable, irresistible fascination that the thought of her, the image of her, possessed for me. I resented it, wrestled with it, struggled under it in vain, the mind was passing through an inexplicable phase, completely subjugated, unnerved and unstrung by the abstract contemplation of pleasure which it fully recognised, absolutely impossible of attainment.

The last day came. We were due at Marseilles at seven in the evening. We dined at six. Eurydice and I sat as usual opposite each other ; and, do what I would, I could not keep

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my eyes from resting on her, an irresistible magnetism drew them back and back to her. She ate nothing. She accepted a few courses and sent them away untouched. She sat white, motionless, with almost all the beauty stamped out of her face, leaving a blank of pallor and suffering.

The punkah still swayed over our table, and it almost brushed our heads; each time it passed over hers it lifted the black, gilt-tinted curls from her forehead and then came back to me.

She never raised her eyes once to mine, nor spoke throughout the whole dinner, and then, when we all rose, I heard the woman next her say :

‘ You look terribly ill, what is the matter, dear? ’

Eurydice was just rising from her chair, her shoulder was slightly raised as she leant one arm on the chair-back, the other smooth,

supple hand just touched the edge of the table. I watched her.

The heavy white lids lifted suddenly, and the brilliant eyes flashed over her friend's face, and the white lips curved in a satiric smile.

'Sea-sick!' she said with a mocking laugh, and got up and passed out of the saloon.

I had heard, and I walked over to the port-window, feeling a sudden violent revolt, a wild rebellion of Self against Self-made laws. That laugh of hers, full of bravely repressed and hidden pain, and ringing with mockery and cynical philosophy, stirred and roused my admiration. She was of the material of which martyrs are made. An untamable, unbreakable spirit, that laughed in the face of Fate and mocked at its own pain, fired the blood in those smooth veins.

I stood there for a time. Then I turned to seek her. See her I must, speak to her once more before we touched the land.

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I threaded my way through the confusion, over and amongst the scattered luggage and round the groups of passengers, passed down the companion-stairs, found my way to her cabin door and knocked.

There was an assentive murmur from within, and I pushed the door open.

She was sitting on the floor in the centre of the cabin, before a half-packed portmanteau. Her face was blanched, and she looked ill and tired, as she glanced up when the door opened.

She did not move as her eyes fixed upon me.

I came in, shut the door and leant against it. Ceremony was laid aside, forgotten.

The cabin was in disorder, crowded with feminine attire and trifles of all sorts ; over the berth by the window swung, still unpacked, her husband's portrait. The window stood open, and beyond gleamed the lights of the port.

‘I am leaving now,’ I said, and my voice

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sounded half-strangled to myself, 'if you wish it ; do you ?'

Her lips quivered visibly. The pale face grew paler ; then she turned her eyes from me and looked into the trunk.

'Yes,' she answered in a low voice ; 'go.'

'And is this to be final? Do think again. Let me know where you are going, let me know where you will be. Let me have the hope of seeing you sometimes, Eurydice !' I added desperately as she would not speak.

'No ; it is impossible,' she said at last in a low tone. 'I have quite decided. This is final.'

'Shall I never see you again ?' I said dully, and my eyes seemed literally to drink in the vision of her and hold it.

'Chance may throw us together again, but I hope not,' she answered with an intense gravity. 'This is our duty—to part now—and we know it. Let us do it.'

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She turned her face to me. It was white and agonised.

Her lips trembled violently in soft human weakness, but the eyes were lit up with holy determination and resolve.

It appealed to me; for that moment I felt I would not break it if I could.

‘Good-bye, then.’

One step forward and I bent over her, lifted her, and strained her hard to my breast and kissed her.

It was the death of our love, and guiltless as a dying kiss.

The white throat swelled in a suffocated sob, the tremulous arms fluttered against my throat.

‘Good-bye, Evelyn.’

And I went out.

I walked along the crowded lower passage, blind and deaf to all round me, conscious only of what a curse at times this life can seem.

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I found Dickinson waiting for me with our luggage just outside the smoking-room door.

'Thought you were never coming,' he exclaimed discontentedly as I came up.

Then he looked hard at me. 'I say, old man, have a drink or, er—something, won't you?' he added in a different sort of voice.

'No, thanks,' I said with a smile. 'Come along, let's get off this as soon as we can.'

Dickinson did the best he could do under the circumstances—he let me alone—and arranged himself for the luggage and the other formalities, and within ten minutes we were walking down the quay away from the ship. I glanced back at it once before passing the customs barrier. Its masts and rigging stood out clear against the white light of the town, but all I saw was the inside of her cabin.

Dickinson passed our baggage through the customs and then we rattled in the lumbering cab through the stony streets of Marseilles.

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'How soon can we get on to London?' I asked.

'Oh, I say, old fellow, can't you stop the night here. I'm beastly tired and sea-sick,' said Dickinson remonstratingly.

I put my hand on his arm. 'I know you are, but hold on another few hours.'

'Few hours!' groaned Dickinson from the back of the cab. 'It's thirty at the least. I hope you know that.'

'Yes . . . well, Paris, then . . . for God's sake let's get away from here!'

'Very good,' said Dickinson resignedly; 'let it be Paris, then, and we'll go on by the one A.M. train. There I shall drop like a ton of bricks. Sleep for a week, I think.'

CHAPTER III

THE next six months, spent partly in Paris partly in London, were six months lost, thrown away in dissipation that failed even in being amusing, and in which I wasted as much money and strength as one could well do in the time.

Of course I made excuses for myself. No man, except sometimes in retrospection, and sometimes under the influence of a great moral shock, will ever look his conduct in the face.

If he admits it is bad, he immediately marshals an illimitable number of excuses to explain and justify the evil he is committing, until he has conclusively proved that he is in reality but the passive and suffering martyr to the surrounding circumstances.

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And my excuses seemed to me to be legion. I needed distraction. It was positively necessary to me to forget, at any rate to conquer, the dishonourable passion for another's wife.

Anything that I could do was better than to encourage my present feelings, to continue to think of her as I was thinking; and without distraction, without diversion, it was impossible to drown the remembrance of her as it was obviously my duty to do.

As to the passion itself, I was greatly to be excused.

I had been badly treated, unfairly used. Of course, if I had known the truth from the first, the passion would never have been allowed to grow into being, etc., etc.

Then, too, I realised so keenly that I had done my duty in the matter by accepting my dismissal, that I felt I could allow myself a little license now, for in the male moral code we make a little virtue go a long way.

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Besides, there was no doubt that there was but one method by which I could efface Eurydice's image from my mind, blunt the edge of remembrance and steel myself to indifference to her if it should chance that we met again.

And now that the six months had dwindled down to their last few days, I sat alone in the dining-room as the March afternoon closed in, with hosts and legions of uncomfortable thoughts advancing upon me, silently, in whole armies of serried battalions.

They came in squadrons, the first cohorts supplied by the just past month, and continually supplemented by detachments of recollections from each preceding month, backwards to the very night I had left her on board.

When I had sat down in the chair I had attempted to roll up a cigarette, but the violent trembling of my shaky fingers had left it a simple impossibility, and this sight of my

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weakness had been the signal for the commencement of the march of that terrible army upon me.

I looked round the room weighted down with depression. I hated the solitude but yet felt too ill to go out of it. I leant farther back in the chair, and my eyes travelled mechanically round and round the room in the growing dusk.

It had every conceivable comfort and bore signs of, I might say, wealth. Yes, I had means, money, and almost every other gift to make life acceptable, and yet from six months' leave and idleness I had been unable to purchase more than at the most two or three hours of pleasure.

For pleasure, unfortunately, does not sell herself at a fixed price, and enjoyment exists not in that which we enjoy, but in our capacity for enjoying, just as not the food we eat, but only that which we digest, nourishes us.

I got up after a time, crossed the room, my shadow falling huge and distorted on the red and gilt paper in the firelight, pushed aside the velvet curtains hanging across the door into the bedroom and entered the room.

I was moved by an impulse of curiosity to see whether I looked as ill as I felt, whether the relentless army that was invading and wounding my brain left visible traces of its ravages.

I walked up to the glass and from its dusky surface in the gathering gloom, my own face looked back at me. I scrutinised it attentively with a cynical smile, pallid, lined and seamed about the eyes, the lips livid, and all the vitality gone out of it.

Not much consoled, I strolled back again to the dining-room hearth, my resolution to make some break in this sort of existence ratified by that glance in the glass.

I looked idly along the mantelpiece, and

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amongst the letters lying there my eye caught a still unanswered invitation from the old colonel of my former regiment to stay with him.

I remembered he had a big place just out of Dover.

'The very thing,' I thought, and I sat down and wrote an acceptance of his offer for a three weeks' stay.

'It will make a break here at least,' I thought. 'Dickinson is such an awful fellow for going the pace, and I am tired of keeping up with him.'

The three weeks went by, and at their end, with a sense of relief, lined, as it were, with boredom, I was coming back to town.

As the train slid into the station, I drew back idly the curtain that had fallen across the window-panes and looked down the platform.

The electric light streamed from above on some scattered, moving figures, and a warmer

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blaze from the bookstall fell on a compact group nearer my end of the train.

The knot loosened just as my carriage approached it, and one figure detached itself and walked on down towards the refreshment-room.

It was Eurydice.

I knew it directly, though my gaze had not caught her face.

But that gait was hers and hers alone, the same that had arrested my eyes as she walked the length of the slippery, sloping deck ; the same, the perfect balance of the figure ; the same, that erectness of the head.

The very toilette was as distinctly hers—extremely quiet as to colour and extremely smart as to cut ; and how familiar the fall of that skirt, short enough to let me see the incomparably tiny feet walking down the lighted platform.

My heart rose suddenly, leapt with the same

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violent pulse as when I had seen her the first morning on board.

Keen pleasure ran through my tired brain and languid nerves, and I recognised I had been chasing it for the last six months in vain.

I gripped my bag with one hand, unfastened the door with the other, and jumped from the still-gliding train.

She was walking slowly before me, and a few steps of mine brought me up to her just as she passed beneath the central light.

‘Eurydice! ’

It was great cheek on my part to use her Christian name, but it was accidental, and not intentional, cheek.

It never passed into my brain nor came to my lips to say Mrs. Williamson, and after all I don't know that it mattered.

She turned suddenly, and we were face to face beneath the white, searching light.

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That face!

The light played over it and showed it to me in all its own familiar charm.

The delicacy of the pallor, the brilliance of the eyes, and the long lines of the eyebrows ; I noted and recognised them all with a pained and eager delight ; and under the rolled-back velvet hat-brim one small, dark curl lay on her forehead beneath her transparent veil.

Our right hands were in each other's, our eyes locked together, and we said nothing.

Time, circumstance, position, resolutions, decisions, for those first few seconds were not.

We were the one woman and the one man in the world for each other, and we had met again after absence.

'Is this your luggage, sir ?'

The porter wheeled his truck close up beside us.

I drew her to one side out of its way by her small, gloved hand, and I knew in those few

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seconds that it had the same old magnetism, the same curious electric power over my own nerves and frame as when it had touched mine first.

'Yes; that's mine,' I said, hastily. 'Look after it a minute, will you?'

'Sorry, sir, it's against the regulations. I can't stay by it, sir.'

Damn! I thought. 'Well, put it in the cloak-room, then. You can do that, I suppose?'

The porter nodded and turned the truck round.

I still held my companion's dear little hand in mine. I looked down on her with a smile.

'What a fortunate chance to meet you here!' I said, conventionality coming to my aid and throwing a suffocating cloak over all my feelings, and giving them their expression only in this one stereotyped phrase.

And almost any other woman would have

answered me in the same language of convention.

Eurydice, however, withdrew her hand from mine and said merely, 'Fortunate! What's the use of it?'

Her tone was half hopeless, half impatient, and a still paler shade came across her face.

The words brought back upon my recollection all that had been forgotten for that first instant.

It was she, as usual, with her peculiar decision and clear mental vision who saw the situation as it really was, not as it appeared to be.

For me the meeting, at least in these first moments, was a simple pleasure; for her, whose mind gripped only realities, and whose eyes it was impossible to blind with illusions, the meeting was simply a vexation, useless, as she said, and therefore worthless.

She turned from me, and I thought she was

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positively going to leave me without another
word.

‘Where are you going now?’ I said hurriedly.
She looked at me, with the familiar mocking
laughter on her brilliant face, which was her
mask for everything.

I had seen it drawn down over pain, weariness, and despair. She met the shocks and the tedium of life, and she would meet the fear and horror of death with that same careless smile.

‘To the refreshment-room,’ she said lightly, and walked on; and I walked beside her.

‘And there is no use . . .’ I said mechanically,
‘Nothing is changed?’

‘Nothing,’ she answered in a grave, inflexible voice, looking straight before her up the platform.

A few steps more, and we were at the refreshment-room doors.

At the entrance stood a group of loose

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women talking, and a vile expression reached
us as we came up.

Eurydice passed through them indifferently
with an 'allow me,' and without a shade upon
her face. It was I that felt revolt for her as
her skirt brushed theirs.

We found the room quite full. It was not
long before the departure of the Dover express,
and a crowd of thirsty passengers had closed
in round the counter.

We pushed our way gradually through them
to one end, and Eurydice leant her back
against the wall and laughed at my efforts to
find her a chair.

'It doesn't matter a bit,' she said. 'And
there's really no space to sit down. Get me
the coffee; and what are you going to have for
yourself?'

'Coffee, I think, too,' I said, and ordered for us
both over the heads of a couple of Germans, and
then turned to look at her again at my ease.

In the crush and the heat, with the careless gabble of voices round us, the clatter of glasses and scent of drink from the bar, the blaze of light from above and the tobacco smoke in the air, that calm, delicate face was singularly striking.

She noticed me scanning it eagerly, and her eyes softened in a smile as they rested on mine.

'Like the scratch suppers on board, isn't it?' she said as we waited patiently for the appearance of our coffee.

'Yes,' I answered without heeding her words, absorbed in noting the tired shades beneath her eyes.

'What have you been doing all these six months?'

'Living at Wimbledon taking care of Mrs. Williamson. I am a model daughter-in-law, you know.'

'And wife!' I murmured, and a line of scarlet

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glowed suddenly in her cheeks and then died as suddenly.

‘And what have you been doing?’ she said, fixing her eyes upon me.

I coloured suddenly. I felt the hot blood mount in a scalding stream to my very eyes as I muttered ‘Nothing,’ and I turned from her to the counter and looked anxiously for the cups of coffee.

The memory of those six months came back upon me so horribly. They glared in such contrast to her own.

For six months she had been treading the clean narrow path of duty, temptations passed, difficulties overcome, and I for those same months had been wandering further into the mire of personal satisfaction, all temptations embraced, all difficulties avoided.

I could see as in a mirror held up to me what her days had been, pure and clear, and filled with a wearying, unsatisfying virtue,

dragging after each other in intolerable tedium, which she had had the strength to endure and the will to live through, and mine seemed lost, as I looked back, in a mist of mere degradation.

‘My dear fellow, I can see what you have been doing,’ she said in an undertone with a suppressed laugh, and as I caught the mockery on the pale face and the derision in her eyes I would have given more than I can say to be able to deny her thoughts.

‘I never thought I should meet you again,’ I muttered lamely.

‘So it didn’t matter.’

‘No; it is very extraordinary that two people, both living in or near town and both going about a good deal, should ever meet! I admit that! Oh, here’s the coffee.’

She straightened her figure and turned to the counter and drew the two steaming cups towards her. I watched her, and the know-

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ledge came to me suddenly that I loved her now, as when we had parted.

Dimly, in a vague, hurried way, I realised now that the past six months had done nothing to deaden the passion, nothing to alter or weaken that; it was my will to resist it that they had weakened.

Like a man roused from his sleep, who feels hurriedly for his weapons of defence to find them gone, I tried to recall all those feelings that I remembered had moved me when I parted from her, but they were nowhere.

I had no time for thought, for she kept asking me whether I liked three or four lumps of sugar in my coffee, but I felt a confused sense of apprehension and surprise that I could not define to myself.

‘Oh, three please, no more, and no milk . . . Where are you staying now, then, in town?’

Her face was hidden by the coffee cup,

but I saw her eyebrows contract above the edge.

'What does it matter where I am staying?' she said as she set the cup down.

'Mayn't I come and see you?' I said, and I looked straight into her eyes and wondered vaguely that my conscience did not reproach me, but it did not.

A cold surprise came all over her face.

She elevated her eyebrows.

'What do you mean? Have you forgotten all that was said on board, settled and decided and arranged?'

'I don't know,' I answered, looking down into the coffee and stirring it, and that was strictly the truth.

I remembered we had talked on board and made resolutions and decisions, and I had suffered, and she had perhaps cried, but somehow I seemed to have forgotten all that had prompted it, and why we had done it. Now as

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I looked at her, there seemed to have been no necessity. In fact the necessities seemed to be all the other way.

'I know I have not had an hour's pleasure since I last saw you.'

She laughed slightly.

'I should be inclined to doubt that, but even if it were true, we're not here for pleasure, you know: we're always told that.'

The passengers round us had emptied themselves on to the platform, and the room now was nearly empty.

On a bench at our left side sat one man with an objectionable person drinking brandy and water, and three men leant across the bar chaffing the gilt-haired barmaid. A marble table at the far end was vacant and secluded.

'Let us transfer ourselves,' I said. 'You must be tired of standing.'

I carried the coffee to the table, and then drew a chair to it: she came up slowly and sat down.

'But why may I not come to see you, just once or twice?' I persisted.

She balanced her spoon idly on the edge of the cup, looked at me, and laughed.

'When one stands on the top of a hill, and one is particularly anxious not to find oneself at the bottom, does one take the first few steps down the declivity? It is very stupid if one does; then one has to go on against one's will or turn and go back, and the little bit of hill behind one seems very steep. We are both on the summit now, let us stop there.'

'I don't know so much about that,' I muttered. 'I have been going downhill steadily all these months, and shall go on, I suppose.'

'Well, in any case you must go alone.'

The tone was very cold, and, looking at her, I saw the old severity come into her eyes and settle on her face.

There was a long silence. She gazed past

me absently towards the gilt-haired creature leaning confidentially towards the three male heads, this side of the counter.'

I looked at her face and studied the stamp of hopeless virtue on it.

'Just as friends,' I murmured at last, following up my own thoughts.

She brought her eyes back to mine, and they flashed with cynical mockery.

'Friendship is an illusion. Do please let us look life in the face.'

'Nobody ever does,' I said, limply.

'I have always tried to. One does deceive and cheat oneself at times, but I always try not to voluntarily.'

'Still, let me come,' I answered, hammering away at the point I wanted to gain with the dull persistency of the male, and sliding away from the involved metaphysical arguments she loved. I knew they were dangerous ground where one often gets led into unconsciously

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admitting the theoretical infamy of some practical step one is urging.

It was all very well for Eurydice, she could always find her way about amongst the sinuous windings of her talk, but I sometimes found myself left behind, hopelessly entangled.

'No.'

'At least tell me where you are.'

'But what is the good?'

'Because,' I said, flushing hotly and looking straight into the mocking eyes, 'it will show that you trust me. You know if you tell me not to come, I shall not come. We don't fool with each other. A command from you and a promise from me is a command and is a promise. Tell me your address, and say "Come" or "Don't come," and I shall obey, but I object to being treated as if you were a coquette, or I could not be trusted.'

'Oh, certainly, I trust you,' she said quickly.
'I am staying in rooms in Ebury Street, and

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she added the number. 'But my express command to you is not to come, nor to try and see me in any way.'

'Very good,' I said sullenly, and there was a strained silence.

She rose after a few minutes, and I started to my feet.

'Are you going?' I said.

'Yes; I only came in here to order a book at the stall,' she answered. 'Will you see me into a hansom?' she added smiling, and we walked out together on to and down the platform to the station yard. I put her into the hansom and gave the address to the cabman. I closed the doors together across her knees, and then leant forward upon the panels and fixed my eyes on her face. I gazed at it in the blue sheet of light that fell on us from the station lamps, through the murky, rain-filled air, and shone in the hansom doors, over which her face looked out.

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It seemed as if I could never transfer my eyes: hers had a strange expression in them: they were on mine, and dilated.

I was startled by their gaze.

Something of tenderness looked out of them, half-veiled in their usual sorrow.

The horse moved forward: she stretched out one small light-gloved hand: there was a sudden impulsive leaning forward of her figure, a flash of her white cheek in the light.

'Come,' she said.

The whip fell, the horse plunged forward, there was a splash of muddy puddles, a rattle of the wheels, and the cab bowled away through the glistening, rain-swept station yard.

I stood there on the kerb motionless, with that one word stinging my brain like a bullet embedded there.

Had she really said it? It seemed incredible. Had I imagined it? No; it sounded in my ears still, her voice.

'Come.'

So she had given way, yielded. Was it possible? After the scornful hardness of all her words to me to-night. After the inflexible resistance at our last parting? Yes, but after six months. What was it? How was it? What influence had worked this change in us? How was it that our strength had slipped from us? She was as weak as I.

And quick as a flash of light passes before the eyes, the thought struck my brain, I did not condemn her for her weakness, did not even despise it. I was indifferent. And I knew six months back I should have condemned her. I had loved her then for her strength, been stung to an enthusiasm for her virtue, and now I recognised that both were failing, and realised that their failure neither pained nor shocked me.

I stood there an indefinite time, with my brain in a whirl of surprised confusion, shot

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through and through with pleasure, and then turned half-mechanically back into the station to have a drink and think it all over.

I got my drink, and then stood turning the empty tumbler round and round upon the counter, and staring absently at it while I tried to wrestle out the cause of this change of phase.

My own side of the problem was fairly easy. I saw now my six months' dissipation had failed to destroy or even weaken in the slightest my love for her.

And, granting this were so, the real effect that it had had, that of blunting my moral susceptibilities and obscuring my judgment was comprehensible enough, but why then in her should six months, spent in an entirely different, in fact, directly opposite way, have produced exactly the same result?

Could it be, I asked myself, that both Virtue and Vice are essentially tiring in their nature?

Could it be that the human being is not fitted to sustain an extended course of either one or the other?

In a natural state, he would alternate one with the other, and in this mixed existence his moral character perhaps most fully develops and expands itself.

Was it possible that an enforced protracted course of virtue is really as enfeebling, as enervating to the finer moral constitution as a course of vice?

Perhaps there is something attenuating to the mental fibres in long continued virtue: the soul, the heart, the moral muscles become cramped by it: they are deprived of all that movement and exercise natural to them, in the fervours of repentance, passionate remorse and agonised regret consequent upon error, and they degenerate as the body does, of which all its muscles are not brought properly into play.

Could it be that Eurydice had degenerated

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during six months of immaculate virtue, as I had during six months of virtue's opposite? Had she grown insensibly as tired of virtue as I of vice?

Paradoxical as it might seem, our meeting with each other promised a radical change to each of us.

To me, sunk for six months in coarser forms of pleasure, my love for this woman soared up before my mental vision as something brilliantly pure, even holy and virtuous by contrast: a change almost from vice to virtue.

To her, wearied of the absolute, colourless purity of her life, her love for me seemed something terribly, fearfully guilty, a transition from virtue to vice.

Was this change that which had captivated her?

The next moment I hated myself for thinking in this way of her. No, I told myself, ten thousand times no. There was some other motive, but what?

At last I broke up my reflections in sheer despair, finished hurriedly a fourth whisky and soda, and came out on the platform. I collected my luggage from the cloak-room, had it put on a hansom, and drove off to my rooms.

When I came into the dining-room I found Dickinson there, extended in a long chair, smoking and reading the *Globe*.

‘Hullo, old pally, got back?’ he said, looking round his paper, as I walked in and flung my bundle of rugs on the sofa.

‘Got back, yes, and who on earth do you think I met at Victoria?’

‘Haven’t a notion,’ returned Dickinson, whose thoughts ran constantly on unpaid bills. ‘Your tailor?’

‘No.’

‘Your money-lender?’

‘No.’

‘Some Johnny you owe money to?’

‘No.’

'Oh well, imagination won't stretch further—give it up.'

'That girl I was so spoony on on board ship, Mrs. Williamson.'

'Aha!' said Dickinson, sitting up and looking interested. 'Speak?'

'Of course!' I said, flushing and coming up to lean against the mantelpiece. 'I was not likely to see her and let the occasion slip!'

'But I thought you had such a tragic good-bye on board, a sort of eternal adieu business, eh?'

'Yes, I know; but I always did think I'd been in a beastly hurry about it,' I said meditatively, looking down at the rug.

'So that little arrangement has been knocked on the head now, I suppose?' said Dickinson, derisively. 'Where's she staying? in town?'

'Yes.'

'Alone?'

'Yes.'

'Are you going to see her?'

'Yes.'

'Did she ask you?'

'Yes.'

Dickinson laughed. 'I say, that's pretty thick, isn't it?'

'I don't know what you imply,' I said, annoyed. 'I shall call, of course, like any other ordinary acquaintance.'

Dickinson folded up his paper and tossed it aside without replying, and I said after a minute, following up the thread of my own thoughts. 'That's a thoroughly good woman, Reggie: one of the few women that are.'

'And you're going to alter all that, I see, it's so old-fashioned. Bring her up to date, reform her!'

'On the contrary, she'll reform me,' I said curtly. 'I'm sure I need reformation.'

Dickinson looked as if he would have liked to contradict me, but his conscience would not allow him to.

'Have a peg, or anything?' he said after a moment.

'No, thanks; I had a series at the station.'

'After the interview, I suppose! Well, what sport did you have in the country?'

'Oh the usual thing,' I said, sitting down, and we talked and smoked until past midnight.

Sitting up late and passing an absolutely sleepless night did not prevent my having energy enough to call upon Eurydice early the following afternoon: and I strolled about the empty drawing-room I was shown into with a sort of delight at the new atmosphere I was in.

There seemed a restful peace, a tranquil virtue in the very air, in the white light coming through the long lace curtains, in the straight-stemmed palms on the different tables, in the slim, narrow-seated chairs and pale hard satin couch.

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There was no scent in the air, not even of flowers: an unopened *Times* lay on the table, and some books filled a case against the wall. I walked over to these and examined them. Mostly Latin authors of the irreproachable order, Martial and his school being missing; Greek seemed represented by Sophocles and only one innocent volume of seductive and reprehensible Plato. The rest were French philosophical books of the purest kind, and English poetry.

Yes; in this room everything seemed to speak of peaceful innocence, calm clearness of mind and life, and to me, accustomed to bachelor haunts, rooms dusky with smoke and furnished in decadent tints, with curious pictures behind odd curtains, and peculiar looking books lying on the tables, with luxurious ottomans and long lounging chairs, its cool simplicity made a sudden and delightful change.

I walked about, feeling all the ardour of first reform waking in me, and beginning to toy with the new idea of virtue as delightedly as a child to play a new game.

After a minute or two Eurydice came in, and the white morning light fell full on her face as she came up to me. It looked tired, with the unutterable tiredness of life lived without love and without joy, a mental tiredness that no physical fatigue can equal.

'You have come very soon,' she said, a smile seeming to light up the pallor of her face as sunlight falling upon snow.

'Of course,' I said gravely, and we both stood silent, looking at each other: a second perhaps or two: then Eurydice sat down in a wicker chair by the window and I dropped into one opposite her.

'I suppose you thought it very extraordinary, my asking you to come, last night, after all I said; but when you told me about yourself and

the life you had been living, I felt half responsible for it . . .' she paused and turned her tired-looking gaze through the window.

I waited, unwilling to interrupt her, listening, absorbed in listening for the curious and beautiful voice to continue.

'I felt,' she went on with a sort of effort, 'that if, as you said, seeing me and knowing that you were coming to me would help you to live differently, it would be the most selfish, cruel thing I could do to refuse. That was my reason for saying come. I have your honour to trust to that it will be of some good to you, some benefit; if not, as I said at first, I think we had better not see each other.'

She was still looking away from me, and there was no flush on her face and no self-consciousness: it was as if she spoke on some grave and impersonal matter.

But I could not suddenly become so sublimely impersonal, and I glanced over the

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reposeful figure in front of me with a half-
derisive smile.

'There is,' I said, with a sort of mocking
assent, 'a sentence in a celebrated work—"Flee
from temptation."

Eurydice turned her head instantly, and the
disdain in the light-filled eyes reminded me of
the flash from them that had nearly scorched
me upon board ship.

'Yes,' she answered, 'and there is another
sentence in that same celebrated work: "Resist
the devil and he shall flee." That is the motto
I have always taken. Stand your ground,
whatever the cost. Temptations are at every
point. To flee from one is to rush into another.
Besides, supposing that you have fled success-
fully hitherto before evil, and then you are
called upon suddenly to meet one from which
you cannot flee, and from which there is no
escape, how can you resist, then, if you have
no practice and no training? Whereas each

one conquered gives you strength to meet the next. I would say, "Never flee." Embrace every temptation. Take it into your arms, against your very breast, and kill it there. Strangle it, and then throw it away from you, and continue your own path in life unmoved.'

She sat up facing me. The pallor and dense fatigue had fallen like a mask from her face. The power and force of intellect seemed set upon her brow, looking out of her eyes, playing like sudden light all over the transfigured countenance.

Opposite me, in this hum-drum little drawing-room, against the white curtains, looked back at me a face gleaming with rapt enthusiasm, as a martyr's and saint's may have looked up from the stake to heaven, or across the flare of the kindling faggots.

I sat and looked, and couldn't help thinking, if in this case I were the temptation, I shouldn't

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object to being taken into her arms, even to be
strangled and thrown away afterwards!

'What can your life be worth,' she added,
'spent in running away from temptations?'

'How would it be to yield to them all?' I
said, with a smile.

She stared at me for a moment in silence,
and slowly a look of horror gathered in her
expanding eyes.

'Evelyn! What has come over you? Since
we parted I can't understand. . .'

She got up and pushed her chair back with
with one slight white hand.

It seemed as if that hand had grown whiter,
more transparent, than when I had seen it
last.

I got up, too, and walked nervously up and
down the room.

How I admired the woman now, as always!
How all my moral being went out in devo-
tional worship to the moral beauty of hers!

'I don't know,' I said shortly. 'I think I have come to see that there's no use in doing one's duty, no use in clinging to theories and ideas. You admit that there is nothing before and after life; well, I can find deuced little in it. Oughtn't we to make the most of that little? Sin! What is sin? Is anything a sin that makes this existence more tolerable?'

I stopped short in front of her. I felt my face whitening with excitement and a mist rising before my eyes. I had not meant to say anything of the sort when I came.

I was surprised dimly myself at the emotion growing in my brain.

She looked back at me, white, too, with the passion of impersonal argument that touches closely one's personal life and conduct.

'No sin can render existence more tolerable,' she exclaimed. 'It lays a still heavier burden upon life. In the scales of sin moments of joy

are weighed against months and years of misery !'

We stood looking at each other, everything, ourselves included, forgotten in the heat and crush of our thoughts, just as in the old word battles on board, and in the second's pause that followed her last sentence the door was opened and the servant entered with a tray of tea things, which she methodically began to arrange on a side table.

We both laughed and subsided into our chairs. The prosaic detail of every-day life obtruding itself at that moment dissipated the passionate enthusiasm of our argument, and when the servant left, Eurydice crossed the room to make the tea, with some light, commonplace remark, as if unwilling to re-open the discussion.

We talked on, mere conventional trivialities making up our conversation, and after perhaps half an hour I rose to go.

Eurydice, as she shook hands with me, looked

straight into my eyes with the clear, penetrating light of the soul gleaming in her own.

'Then tell me,' she said quietly and without preface, 'will it be any benefit to you to come here occasionally? Will it help you?'

'Yes,' I said meekly. 'It will be like going to church.'

Eurydice smiled the faintest shadow of a smile.

'I have your promise, while you come,' she added seriously, 'while you are my friend, that you will try to lead the best life possible to you? This is the condition of your coming here, and I have your word of honour you will keep it?'

'Yes,' I said merely, but I think she was satisfied.

There was a momentary pause, and then I said gravely, 'Your example is not quite thrown away, I know your own life is a martyrdom.'

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‘No,’ she said quietly, and a divine contentment seemed to descend upon the pale face and a fresh strength and resolution play round the cold lips. ‘No; say rather an infinite peace.’

CHAPTER IV

WITHIN the course of the next five weeks I had seen Eurydice perhaps six or seven times, calling at her house once, and rarely twice, in the week. Her manner was kind, and gentler, it seemed to me, than formerly ; the old mocking spirit had nearly died out of it, but there was a distance, a long, long distance, in that manner, a coldness in that gentleness, that was very slight and delicate, but which chilled like the first breath of winter that stirs insidiously through the warm autumnal air.

I had kept my promise to her, of course, and for the last five weeks my life had been an exemplary one, and I knew it rendered her

happier to see the influence for good that she possessed over me.

But the reform was not a radical nor a deep-seated one, since no reform enforced or induced by outside circumstances can be so. The very soul of all true self-reform is in personal revolutionary ardour which can prompt and sustain the reformation, independent of and in spite of outside influences. All other self-reform is a mere counterfeit.

And the command this stronger mind and higher moral nature exerted over me was beginning to weary me, and I longed now to escape from it.

While the privilege was still denied me I had been eager to be allowed to see her and know her as a mere acquaintance, but now that I had gained it I found that she was right.

As she had predicted, acquaintanceship was unsatisfactory and friendship an illusion, and the upshot of my reflections, as I flung away

the cigar end and glanced round the darkening room, found expression in the resolution :

‘It’s slow. Cut it.’

Then I turned to the neglected paper, took it up, and glanced through the divorce cases by way of distraction.

At dinner that night I talked with Dickinson in a desultory way of change and travel; then I hinted that I wanted a change, thought town life getting rather long, remarked our leave was half through, and we neither seemed much the better for it, and wound up by asking if he didn’t think a trip out as far as Gib, say, to start with, would do *him* a lot of good?

And Dickinson, who certainly is a most good-hearted, obliging and convenient fellow, fell in with the proposal at once.

I did not tell Eurydice anything of my decision or views. I had made up my own mind as to what was best to do, and formed my own resolution, and it was not till all our

preparations were made and I was at her place for the last time, or the last time but one, that I determined to tell her.

I did not mean to make a tragic good-bye of it, nor conjure up the passionate phase of feeling we had parted in on board.

We had been meeting as ordinary acquaintances, on the terms of conventional politeness, for over a month ; these were the only terms we could be on. Then let them stand now.

‘Heroics don't suit our modern everyday existence,’ I thought idly, as I lounged on the settee in her softly-shaded room, smoking—for she allowed me to smoke—cigarettes, and watched through half-closed lids the woman opposite me, on the other side of the little bamboo tea-table.

It was four o'clock ; the April sun slanted warmly through the lowered venetians, played amongst the blue egg-shell china, and caressed the white hands moving the cup in the tray.

It glinted too irritatingly on the plain gold circlet of the left hand third finger, and struck out venomous-looking green and blue stabbing rays from the diamond guard above.

'She is rather of the heroic order though,' I thought on ; 'that's the worst of her,' and my eyes travelled from the hands upwards over the slight figure to the delicate face with its tranquil eyebrows, and its expression of serene, indifferent repose.

'I'm leaving England very shortly,' I said, after there had been silence for a few minutes.

'Oh, really? Why?'

'No particular reason,' I returned carelessly. 'I feel I want a change, that's all.'

'When are you going?'

'Next week. I've settled to leave Wednesday. Going to Gibraltar with Dickinson. We shall use up the rest of our leave out there, I expect.'

I watched her face closely as I spoke, but

not a muscle changed nor an eyelash quivered. The next second she leant a little forward and gently stirred the fire.

‘Ah, and then go on to India from there?’ she said quietly.

I nodded.

I certainly had not thought when I came that I wanted or even expected her to be moved or seem distressed at my departure, but I knew now that I must have had some such anticipation, from the vexed annoyance and disappointment I felt as I met her expression now, which was simply three parts indifferent and one part resigned.

The involuntary resentment against it was so keen that when I had risen to go, and she said as her hand lay in mine, ‘Shall I see you again, then, before you leave?’ a curt negative came to my lips and I should have uttered it, but an accent of tender sadness on the words made me hesitate.

'Of course, if you wish it,' I said gravely instead, and stood waiting for her to speak again.

She looked absently through the window by which we were standing for a few seconds before replying.

'Mrs. Denvers is dining with me on Monday night,' she said at last, 'and we are going to the Sonnambula afterwards, would you and Mr. Dickinson care to come with us—or perhaps you are too busy?

'No; we shall be very pleased indeed,' I answered quietly.

'Come, then,' she said with a charming smile, withdrawing her hand. We exchanged good-nights, and then I left her.

When I told Dickinson on my return of her invitation, and my acceptance of it for him, he made some impolite remarks and told me that he couldn't come.

Pressed as to the reason, he confessed he had

a seat at the Alhambra for that night to take a farewell view of a young person engaged there in whom he was interested.

I was slightly annoyed, as he would have paired Mrs. Denvers and left Eurydice to me, and, as it was, I should have the two women thrown upon my hands.

'However, perhaps it's as well,' I concluded philosophically.

'Three is a safer number than four.'

On Monday I drove round to Eurydice's house a little before the dinner-hour.

When the maid let me in she seemed slightly agitated, and said with a little flutter:

'Please, sir, Mrs. Williamson had a telegram just now, and she dressed again and went out, and she told me to say if you came before she got back that she didn't expect to be very long.'

I listened to this somewhat confused statement and then nodded and passed into the drawing-room.

Here I strolled about restlessly, feeling a nervous irritation throughout my whole system, and a sort of mental nausea against life in general and one's duty in particular.

'I wish I were out of it and on my way to Gib,' I muttered two or three times as I passed about amongst the fragile tables with their lamps under coloured shades or top-heavy palms in ridiculously small pots.

But somehow I don't think I was genuinely so very anxious to be on my way to Gib.

I had only been in the room perhaps about ten minutes when light hurried steps came up the stairs and Eurydice entered the room.

She was dressed in her walking things, a plain black skirt, a tight-fitting black velvet jacket with a high collar buttoned tightly round her white throat, and a small felt hat.

The night was wet, and the damp chill air had sent a flush to the smooth cheek and scarlet to the lips.

She came forward to me with a smile of greeting, a creature brilliant with life.

'I am so sorry,' she said, 'Mrs. Denvers is very ill and cannot come. Where is your friend?' she added hastily.

'He sent his extreme regrets, but he had a previous engagement,' I answered, and then there was a sudden pause of a moment, and our eyes met each other with a certain conscious embarrassment as we realised we were alone together for the rest of the evening.

Here was a situation which we had neither of us sought, which we had both tried to avoid, and we both knew that the other had wished to avoid it, and yet there was no obvious reason for not accepting it now that chance had thrown us into it.

There was clearly no good nor even plausible excuse for withdrawing, and I can't say that I felt any great inclination to withdraw at that

moment, while probably Eurydice with her stern view of facing life's perplexities and her perfect confidence in her own strength would not admit even to herself that in the position there was any danger to the equanimity of either of us.

Her next words proved this.

The momentary embarrassment passed out of her eyes: she took her hat off and threw herself into an easy-chair.

'Yes, Mrs. Denvers is very bad—sit down, won't you? an inflamed eye, iritis, the doctor says. I only heard it just as I'd finished dressing for dinner, and then, as her wire did not say what was wrong, I felt I must go round and see her.'

'It was very good of you to take all that trouble,' I remarked.

'I am very fond of her,' she answered simply, and added after a minute, 'I thought I should have been back sooner. Will you excuse this

state of undress? I don't think there's time to change back again now.'

'You could not look more charming than you do,' I said quietly.

There was silence for a few minutes; she looked into the fire, and I looked at her and thought over the incident.

It was slight in itself, but slight as it was it indicated the character, the mind, the soul that animated that lovely frame.

Almost every other woman, certainly all the other women I had known on such an occasion as this—the farewell visit of a man who, they knew, admired them, to put it mildly—would have made every effort to stimulate him to the sentiments they nominally forbade, and certainly one of the efforts would have been to make their most elaborate and fascinating toilet.

They would, obeying their sense of duty, very possibly have dismissed him, but they would have wished him to go with a disordered

brain and a torturing image of them stamped in his memory.

But Eurydice was different from these, and the thought of her carelessly thrown aside dinner dress, the simple way she had appeared before me, her resignation to her own sorrow, and the fact that even in such a moment her thoughts could pass so readily from her own affairs to sympathy with another, touched me. My eyes softened as I looked at her. She was a woman of worth. We ate little at dinner, and talked even less. She made no reference whatever to my leaving, and her complete and passive acceptance of it, without dispute and without complaint, gradually produced in me an unreasonable annoyance.

One may respect an emotion, as one may respect a person, and yet be excessively irritated by either, and my feeling of admiration was pretty well swallowed up in irritation by the end of dinner.

When we rose from the table Eurydice walked across to the window. 'It's a very wet night,' she remarked, holding the blind aside and looking out. 'Ah! here comes the brougham. Now, what time is it?' she asked, turning back into the room. 'Nine. It's late, as usual.'

She crossed over to the mantelpiece, picked up her little felt hat from the easy chair, and set it on her head before the glass. I watched her with a smile, knowing she must be acting in sheer absence of mind, and rather pleased to note this first sign of mental distraction.

It was not till we were seated side by side in the brougham, and she leant her head against the back, that she became conscious she had the hat on.

'Why, what a maniac I am!' she exclaimed, with a laugh, taking it off and tossing it on to the opposite seat. 'And you watched me put it on!' she added, turning to me, her face brilliant

between mock anger and laughter, 'deliberately —you horror!'

'Well, I thought you were a little absent-minded,' I returned, smiling.

'Yes; I was thinking about Mrs. Denvers,' she replied simply, growing serious.

'Dash Mrs. Denvers!' I thought.

'That's the comfort of a box,' she said, leaning back in her corner. 'You can go dressed as you please.'

Doubtless because it was the last night, Eurydice seemed more attractive to me this last night than ever before.

As we passed through the vestibule, flooded with white light and crowded with pretty women, I threw a cursory glance round, and then let my eyes return and rest on my companion. Her simple afternoon toilette seemed out of place, I admit, in this crush of silks and glisten of jewellery on bare flesh, and there were many astonished glances and supercilious

smiles at it, but the face above was without a rival in the whole hall, and I felt a strange mixture of emotions as I saw the contemptuous shoulder-liftings of the women at her dress and the lingering glances of the men at her face as she passed. I knew—I saw for myself—that it was not any extraordinary perfection of feature or colouring that raised it so far above the level of all the handsome worldly faces round us, but that remarkable expression of peace, of serene tranquillity, which seemed to rest upon the forehead as light rests upon a lake—the calm, conscious pride that looked out of the luminous eyes. Amongst all these faces, stamped variously with conceit, inanity, or discontent, but all marked alike with some trace of this world's fret of anxiety, hers, in its absolute repose, seemed something almost startling, positively holy.

And the repose was not that of vacuity, it seemed the repose born of a chastened mind,

• in which all earthly passions have been subdued, and which can view the present with indifference and the future with resignation.

She looked a woman at peace with all the world, and at peace with her own conscience, and in that peace proud and secure.

And as I looked at her two great impulses rose simultaneously within me, but the better conquered, and I felt glad I was going to Gib.

Just at the entrance to the vestibule there was a small flower-stall laden, piled up with a profusion of flowers, loose, and made up into sprays and button-holes. I saw Eurydice glance over it, and I took her arm and drew her across to it.

‘Choose some,’ I said, ‘and let me get them for you. What shall it be?’

She smiled, and glanced over the stall, and I saw her eyes resting meditatively on some lilies of the valley, gathered into a spotless sheaf on one side of the table.

'No,' I said suddenly; 'I'm not going to let you have those. I'll choose for you,' and I leant towards the stall and took four damask roses that stood glowing in a china bowl.

They were dark, almost to blackness, and their thick petals turned outwards, glossy, with velvet-like bloom.

'How much?' I said to the girl selling them, and paid her, and then turned and gave the flowers to Eurydice.

She took them and looked at me jestingly, with half-lowered lids.

'As you've chosen them for me, perhaps you'll direct where I am to wear them,' she said, laughing.

'I'll put them in in a minute, not here, in the box,' I answered, and with the colour heightened in both our faces we turned towards the staircase.

When we entered our box the house was three-quarters full. The lights were not yet

- fully turned up, and a faint mist hovered in the dim atmosphere over the auditorium and clung round the drawn curtains of the yet unfilled boxes and the gilding of the gallery.

I glanced down through the misty space and saw the lines of women filing slowly into the stalls, and then turned my eyes back into the secluded darkness of our box.

She had taken a seat beside the window where she would face the stage behind the hanging curtain, and from the shade and across the shadows her eyes met mine.

I felt a dangerous sense of pleasure stir suddenly within me as I looked back into them, a keen, reckless enjoyment of the moment, and I leant forward and took the flowers from her lap.

'May I? will you let me?'

She did not answer, but bent forward with a sort of impulsive submission, and, feeling all the old magnetism that the personality of this

particular woman exerted upon me, rushing through my veins, I fastened two of the roses at her breast.

'Turn your head a little,' I said, and she turned it obediently. There, where her dark hair lay in a silken mass against the white throat, I fixed the remaining two flowers, twisting the stems into her hair and fastening them with one of her own pins. Honestly, I tried to touch her as little as possible in the action, but twice my hand came in contact with her throat, inclined so submissively towards me, and for one moment a violent impulse to abuse that submission rose in me.

I controlled it, and when the roses were fastened, I threw myself back into the opposite seat and leaned forward, looking down into the sea of space below which swam dizzily before me. 'How I love ^{her}!' I thought passionately, feeling the glow of her neck still under my fingers.

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'And how hopeless it is! . . . I'm going . . . well, it's safer so! This is the last time, I swear!'

And because it was the last time, and I knew it, I gave myself up with a sense of security to the enjoyment of the hour. What did it matter? It was quite safe! I was going!

My conscience was at ease because I had elected and chosen my duty, and these last few hours would fortify me to carry it through. Who grudges the condemned his last draught of brandy before he goes to the scaffold?

Sobered a little, I leant back in the box again. I knew in a vague way Eurydice had been murmuring words of thanks or something, but I had not heard them.

'Very full, isn't it?' she said, referring to the house, as I sat back. •

'Will be, I think,' I answered, and at that moment, with a sudden blaze, the lights were

turned fully on throughout the house, and the orchestra burst into the overture.

The wave of sound came up to us, and now in the strong light Eurydice looked across at me, a smile parting her brilliant lips.

'Remember the *café* at Port Said?' she said, and I felt a choking sensation in my throat as I turned my eyes from hers.

'Yes, I remember,' I said gloomily.

In the *café* at Port Said she had been mine. Mine in thought, in hope, in anticipation.

And as the strains of the violins rose and fell and swelled through the brilliant light-flooded house, how I longed for the whitewashed walls, the smoking oil-lamps, the blatant, strident music, and the narrow benches of the Egyptian *café* with those hopes again.

'Programme! Programme!' came sharply through the door as the boy came down the corridor, and in another moment he pushed our door open. 'Programme, sir?' I bought

• a couple and the libretto, and laid them on her knces, crossed lightly one over the other in her usual fashion, one little foot swinging, one elbow leaning on the velvet edge of the box, and her chin supported on her hand as she gazed at the house.

She looked up with a smile.

‘Thanks ; and now get me some chocolates, will you, and I shall be satisfied !’

I smiled too : making these small purchases for her was delightful to me, and I believe she knew it.

I went myself into the corridor and found an attendant, despatched her for the chocolates and returned to the box.

When the woman came back, she brought a tray of different confections and boxes of bon-bons, and I persuaded Eurydice to choose first one and then another till the tray was considerably lightened.

‘Well, it’s an improvement on Egypt, isn’t

it?' she said, bursting open a box of chocolates and putting the dark sweetmeat between her glistening teeth.

'I don't know—yes, as far as the music goes,' I answered.

She looked at me with elevated brows and then laughed.

'In all respects, I should say,' she returned, turning over the sweets in the box with her soft fingers, and apparently intent upon them.

'All perhaps except one,' I said with savage insistence.

'And what's that? do you miss the mosquitos?' she answered, with a lovely jesting smile.

'You were not wearing that ring in Egypt,' I said, more bitterness and more passion coming into my tone than I meant to come.

Eurydice half rose from her seat.

'One word more like that and I shall go home,' she said indignantly.

- 'Oh, forgive me!' I said imploringly, and she sat down again and looked away to the stage.

The hours passed, and the brilliant scenes seemed to hurt my sore eyes as I looked, and the swelling ripples and the falling cascades of music to wound my sore ears as I heard.

I saw and heard mechanically, thinking of the cruelty of Life: that great sandy, stony, waterless desert, with its shifting mirage of happiness ever before the traveller's eyes, eyes blinded, scorched, and quenched, by the pitiless dust of the struggles in its arid ways.

But still I felt master of myself, possessed of that same sort of control which nerves a man to go through with fortitude the last remaining portion of a torturing and prolonged operation: to treat this woman gently and reverently in these few last hours, and then to leave her, was the part I had assigned to myself, and I was acting with the same dogged satisfaction in my

own pain that a man has sometimes in tearing away or rearranging the agonised flesh of a gunshot wound.

The drive back to Ebury Street was made in perfect silence. Eurydice sat beside me and leant back as if fatigued. I looked through the open window into the damp black streets.

She let herself in with her latch key and we stood together on the steps. As she opened the door, and when I was going to hold out my hand to say a formal good-bye, she uttered a sharp exclamation of surprise. I followed her glance into the hall, and saw it piled up with luggage: ship luggage evidently, covered over with red and white labels and marked 'Cabin, Wanted,' on all sides in chalk. 'Major Williamson,' printed in white on the topmost trunk caught my eye.

'He has returned!' Eurydice said simply, looking at me, and there was hardly any emotion on her face. 'He likes to take me

'by surprise like this!' she said with a faint smile. 'He has done so before.'

I could not speak for the moment. I hardly realised now the situation.

Williamson come back! Her husband here in the very drawing-room above! and I had thought him four thousand miles distant!

I stared at the heap of luggage until it seemed to jump before my eyes.

Eurydice seemed neither distressed nor moved, nor in any way confused.

'You . . . you didn't expect him?' I said, looking at her, and noting the unmoved calm of her face.

'No; I did not, not in the least,' she answered. 'But he is always welcome to come home at any time. I am always prepared for him.' She had had difficulty in extricating the key from the lock, but she drew it out now and added: 'You will come up and see him, won't you?'

'Oh no, no, thanks, I'd rather not,' I rejoined^a hastily.

'Why?' asked Eurydice, regarding me with quiet eyes.

'Oh, well, it's late, and—er . . . so on, I'll say good-bye now.'

She did not seek to detain me.

'Very well,' she said gently, 'Good-bye.'

She held out her hand and I took it and held it reverently, and some impulse unlocked my lips and swept away the hesitating confusion of a moment ago.

'Believe me, you have always at least my greatest, deepest sympathy.'

She withdrew her hand and smiled the old glad triumphant smile. 'I have no need of it. I am happier than you think. I am going back to my duty. Trust me: there is nothing to live for in life but that, good-bye.'

'Good-bye.'

I turned to go.

She came to the steps.

‘I hope you'll have a pleasant voyage to Gib.’

‘Thank you.’

The door was closed. I stood and looked up at the windows above me for a few seconds until I saw a slim shadow fall across the yellow blind ; it passed, I saw no more, and I walked away homewards, thinking.

THE END

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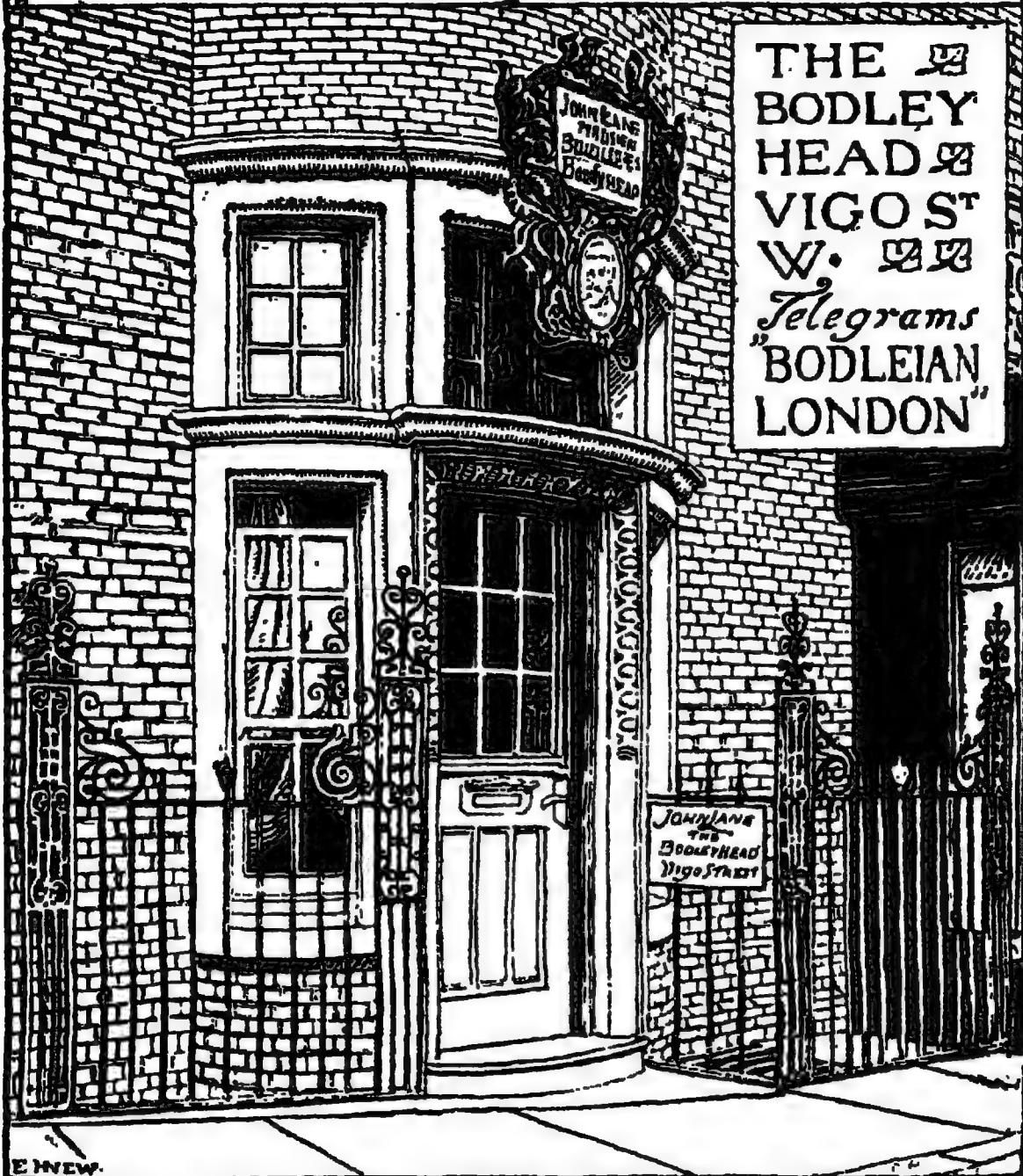
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